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WESTERN

15 **TALES** **15**
STORIES NTS



**GUNS OF THE
OWLHOOT STAGE**
A NOVEL BY **TOM W. BLACKBURN**

GUNSMOKE SCHOOL

by **C. WILLIAM HARRISON**

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

15 STORIES 15 CENTS

VOLUME 5, No. 4



MAY, 1944

A Great Trail-Blazer Novel

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● ON THE TRAIL ●



OF ALL the gun duels that were a part of early frontier history, that between Luke Short, noted gun-fighter—friend of Bat Masterson, Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp—and “Two-Gun Jim” Courtright, came nearest to embodying the drama usually associated with fictionized accounts of the early West.

The altercation occurred in front of the old White Elephant Saloon in Fort Worth, Texas, on February 8, 1887.

Short later denied that there had ever been any differences between Courtright and himself. He said:

“Early in the evening I was getting my shoes blackened at the White Elephant when a friend of mine asked me if there was any trouble between Courtright and myself. I told him there was none. It was all unexpected with me. No idea of a difficulty was entertained.”

Outside, in the early dusk, Jim Courtright and Jake Johnson, a gambler and a partner of Short's, came down the sidewalk. Jake was talking earnestly, trying to persuade Courtright to talk things over with his enemy. To this Courtright finally consented.

Jake and Courtright entered the White Elephant and Jake called to Short. The trio discussed certain matters in the vestibule of the saloon, then walked outside.

The men stood about four feet apart as they talked. The conversation was not audible to passersby, but continued for several minutes, during which Short reminded Courtright of some past transactions. His voice was low and tense, but he was not abusive

nor reproachful. Courtright, too, appeared to have his temper under control.

The situation suddenly grew strained. Short dropped his hands.

When he did so, Courtright ripped out:

“Well, you needn't be getting out your gun!”

Short replied, “I haven't any gun here.” And he raised his vest to prove his words.

Apparently Courtright misunderstood the move. Or, knowing Short for a tricky character, he wasn't taking any chances. As Short's hands approached the region of his belt, Courtright's right hand fell on his gun.

William Allison, who was behind the counter of a shooting gallery next to the saloon, heard a shot, looked up in time to see Courtright stagger and fall.

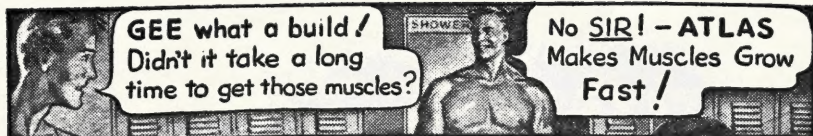
Allison said, “By the time he hit the sidewalk he had his pistol clear out. But he made no effort to shoot after he fell. He was not able. The man who shot him fired one shot as he fell and three after he fell.”

Courtright died a few minutes later.

Short refused to go into details after the shooting, insisting that the trouble was quite unexpected and that he had fired in self-defense. But eye-witnesses, who said that a weapon suddenly appeared in his hand as if by magic, were of the opinion that it might have been in a shoulder holster, or, if not, concealed elsewhere on Short's person.

Courtright was buried with great ceremony, the city fire trucks and the Odd Fellows leading the procession.

Short was never indicted by the grand jury.



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"All right, Sam! You get out first. This is the end of the line!"

CHAPTER ONE

Back Pay

IN 1850, San Francisco was a melting pot of races, breeds, and kinds of men. The changing tides were without pattern. The Mother Lode had already begun her reckless endowment of the cities surrounding her, and San Francisco had more than her share of the yellow metal and the recklessness which went with it. Dave Crane laughed as he toiled the rocking Concord coach onto Front street, scattering the crowd along the rutted track as a fast boat splits a bow-wave. This was his town, and this patternless crowd was made up of his kind of men.

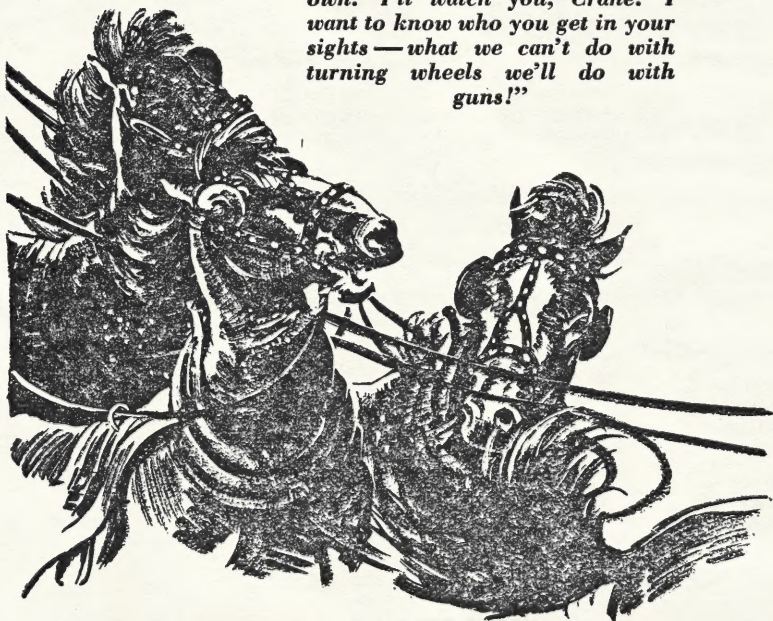
Careless, spendthrift, and living swiftly. Always knowing that today's gold was no loss, that tomorrow would see twice as much coming down from the hills. This was home, this city where the devil took the hindmost and a good man who was fast on his feet could keep always far out ahead. Crane liked the violence; he liked the swagger. He liked running a Concord down Front street as though the rutted, congested track were an

Guns of The Owlhoot Stage

A Novel

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

"A whip is a kind of man all his own. I'll watch you, Crane. I want to know who you get in your sights—what we can't do with turning wheels we'll do with guns!"



open highway—on time and with a girl on the seat beside him.

He grinned and glanced down sidewise at his passenger. She was pretty—and she was scared.

Old Crabb at the office would raise hell again about a skirt riding the box of a Crabb Line stage—at no fare, too. He'd snort and paw like a crotchety old bull; but he'd tone down directly. He'd come to a place where he would remember that Dave Crane was a reinsman, a member of a scant brotherhood of matchless drivers of sixes. He'd remember he owed Crane ten weeks in back pay. He'd keep on growling, but that was all.

Crane put the stage into a rocking turn up toward the Empire House, where the terminus was, and pulled out his watch. It was sixty long miles up from San Jose. Four relays, four winded teams. He shoved the timepiece over where the girl could see it.

"What did I tell you?" he boasted. "Six hours on the nose!"

The girl shook her head with what was meant to be polite wonderment, but her mind was obviously on other things. Crane scowled. She was prettier than any of the others who had been stranded from time to time in San Jose and had taken their chances of coquetting a ride with a stage driver to get on to San Francisco. She had a way of smiling which shortened long miles amazingly. But she had a somber look and an earnestness which had held Crane away the whole distance. And Crane was stung by it. He had a reinsman's vanity and expected all women to recognize it. He was puzzling about the girl when she spoke.

"You're sure you've got enough influence with Mr. Crabb to get him to listen to my proposition, clear through?"

Her uneasiness was so sincere that Crane laughed again, forgetting that she had not told him what her proposition would be—only that she was coming to San Francisco to make it. He thought that he'd have to get Crabb aside and tell him hands off. After the cramping nerve-strain of the drive, dinner with such a pretty face across the table from him would be welcome. Old Crabb could eat alone, proposition or no proposition.

"Influence?" he chuckled. "Why, I come near to bein' a partner in Crabb Lines!"

"How near?" the girl wanted to know.

CRANE didn't want to answer that. Crabb wouldn't listen to a girl. He wouldn't listen to anybody. Rockwell and Mason had him against a wall with their competition and he had no time for any troubles but his own. He'd had sixty miles of good company because he'd boasted a little about his weight with his boss. If he could make it last

till morning he would be satisfied. He'd take the ten o'clock out for San Jose and this girl could go where girls went in San Francisco.

The Empire loomed ahead. Crane eased the team back so that his lines came slack. He set each of the six in his hands—the leaders the most taut, the swings next, and the wheelers hanging loose. The horses swung in of their own accord toward the walk fronting the Empire. When the coach came abreast of the door, Crane set his brake firmly. The slack pulled out of the lines. Each span got its signal in order from the set lines, and the San Jose coach came to an abrupt, beautiful stop without its driver moving one muscle of his arms. That was what made a reinsman—driving a slack harness and setting his lines for every signal to his animals.

Crane grinned at the admiring crowd, swung down, and opened the door of the coach. Two ladies, a man, and a small boy up from San Jose for a night in a big hotel and a day of shopping, alighted. The ladies turned, looked at the girl on the box above them, and sniffed. They turned and went into the Empire, the man and the boy following.

Dave Crane chuckled at that. California was growing up; women had quit being just women. There were ladies and there were other kinds; distinctions of civilization. There was talk of a railroad across from Missouri, and that would come, too. But it would be a long time. Before it came, the spinning wheels of Abbott and Downing's Concord, New Hampshire, coaches would have raised a lot of dust and the knights of the boxes would build many legends.

A roustabout had trouble with the catches holding the boot closed. Crane opened it for him, then turned back and lifted the girl down. She dusted her dress, nervously tried setting her bonnet straight, and Crane saw that she was pale. Really scared. What the devil kind of a proposition was she going to spring on old Crabb that she was so worried about it? He shrugged.

"Let me do all the talking, now," he said. "The boss is a testy old fool, but I'll handle him!"

The girl nodded woodenly. Crane took her arm and bent close.

"But I ought to know who I'm backing before we see Crabb—" he suggested.

"My name is Susan Lander," the girl said.

Crane pushed open the door of Crabb Lines, Ltd. Old Crabb was afoot between the desks, pacing restlessly and chewing a frayed cigar to rags. He flung the cigar from him as the door opened and charged down the room. For a wonder, he did not appear to see Dave's companion. Crane should have been warned by that, but he was not.

"Crabb," he began, "I want—"

"I know what you want, Crane!" old Crabb roared. "Blood! You all want blood. I'm trying to serve the country—give it transportation. And what do I get? A bunch of hounds baying at my heels because a couple of little notes are overdue and I didn't get all the contracts I figured on. Even my own drivers yelping for their back pay! I'm done with it, I tell you!"

Crane let go of the girl's arm and took a sharp step forward. What was the old goat pulling? Ten weeks pay for a top reinsman was a lot of cash, even in San Francisco. And a man didn't back off like that, owing Dave Crane. Old man Crabb's eyes widened with alarm and he stepped back protestingly.

"Damn it, Dave, hold on!" he yelped. "I'm not welshing. I sold the franchises on both the San Jose and Marysville runs to Rockwell and Mason. I sold 'em the rolling stock off the Marysville branch. And it turned me enough cash to pay my notes and buy me a ticket east by boat."

"But not enough to make up ten weeks of back pay!" Crane growled.

Crabb shook his head.

"No, but I've done well by you, Dave."

The line owner reached into his pocket and handed over a dog-eared sheet. Crane took it, snapped it open with an impatient jerk of his wrist. It was a duly witnessed and legal bill of sale for a young fortune's worth of goods: four Concord coaches and a hundred head of coach stock. More money on hoof and wheels than a reinsman could earn in a dozen years. More money—but on the hoof—not in the pocket.

Crane looked up, puzzled and not understanding, and certainly not pleased.

"Don't be a fool, Dave!" old Crabb warned. "California's got to have stages. The whole damned country's got to have 'em. They'll be a long time building rails and there'll be millions in fares to be made before there's steam across the Sierra. But it's a young man's game—and a coachman's! I'm heading back to the States, where a man can make money without wearing a gun. I'm whipped—and I'm turnin' this over to you with a hope there's one gent in California can cut Sam Rockwell and Casey Mason down to size. They'd have got that stock and those coaches if I hadn't deeded 'em off to you. I was owing Dave Crane something. Use it, son. It's no good to me!"

Dave opened his mouth to say something of the whirl of thought in his mind—that ten weeks' pay was a thousand dollars in cash or dust, that Dave Crane was a driver, not a broker for the assets of a bankrupt line. But old Crabb picked up his hat from a desk and plowed for the door. He turned in the opening and fired a parting shot.

"Sell out if you can't see anything but iron money, Crane!" he charged. "I've been a fool and showed yellow. I can't blame a man for doing the same. But the lad that can keep wheels turning and fight Rockwell and Mason at their own game will make a million before he's done!"

The door opened, then closed behind Crabb with a bang. Crane looked down at the paper in his hand. He started slowly toward the front of the office, thinking that Crabb had put something over on him. A drink would go well, right now. A good stiff one. How the hell did a man paint Front Street red when he had wheels and horses to spend instead of dust or money?

He had nearly reached the door when a hand tugged at his sleeve. He turned, his mind still on his problem. His eyes registered a pretty face with eyes that were somber and a mouth that curved with a little devil of a smile.

"Remember me?" a small voice said. "I'm Susan Lander. I guess I'll have to make my proposition to you, now—"

CRANE had thought he would get drunk. Good or bad, a bottle would work out anything. He had forgotten the girl who had talked him out of a free ride up from San Jose. He had forgotten that the drive up had been shorter because he had been thinking of an evening in San Francisco with her. He grinned suddenly. Old Crabb's cute trick wasn't going to spoil that. He'd have his bottle—the girl could have her dinner. He took her arm.

"Come on, Susan Lander," he laughed. "You can tell me all about it at the Greek's."

Twenty minutes later they were ushered to a curtained booth in Nick Pascoula's place off of the Embarcadero. Nick, who prided himself on the whitest linen and the best food in San Francisco, seated them himself. And he rubbed his hands together briskly. Crane knew why. San Francisco was busy. But like any city, it had a need for heroes. Who made better ones than the lean and reckless gentry who drove the big Concords? A reinsman at his tables was good advertising for Nick.

Crane ordered elaborately. Nick bowed effusively and backed away, letting the curtains fall shut behind him. A moment later a man came from the bar with a tray holding Crane's favorite bottled brand and glasses. Dave tossed the man a coin, poured a stiff shot and drank it. The stuff hit bottom with a comforting jolt. This would be a rare night. He leaned forward.

"Crabb would have made a hell of a partner for a pretty," he said to the girl across from him. "You're in luck. What's the story, beautiful?"

Susan Lander made a wry face which amused Crane. Her eyes touched the bottle in front of him with distaste. He grinned and deliberately poured himself another drink. The girl's mouth tightened. She shrugged and leaned a little forward, also.

"I have an idea, Mister Crane," she said earnestly. "There are good coaches in California. Good horses, too. Even a few good drivers—"

The word 'few' was pointed with a shadow of irony. It pricked Crane and he flinched a little. This Lander girl had a quick mind. He liked a woman like that. A woman was usually all take. One who could give out like that had spirit. Crane wouldn't drive a team without spirit. And women and horses were alike to him, things of beauty which were a challenge to his skill and mastery.

"—but there isn't an honest-to-goodness stage line in the State," Susan Lander went on. "Do you know why? Because everything is aimed at records for speed, everybody hopes his line will get mail contracts! No thought of passengers. And passengers are where the money is. There not only have to be relay stations to pick up fresh horses. There have to be places where women can climb out of the stage and rest for fifteen minutes during the changing of teams. There has to be hot water so they can wash the dust from their faces. And three times a day there have to be hot meals waiting for the stage. At night there should be beds with fresh linen. And there ought to be friendliness clear across the line."

The girl was so serious, so intent, that Crane delightedly urged her on, keeping his own face set with interest.

"If a line could get such arrangements made, more women would come to California. And women, with their heaps of baggage, make the best fares. If the women come, the line can build East clear to the end of rails. Then there will be mail contracts—big ones for the first line to cross the country. The government wants mail to go by direct connections. Staging isn't driving horses; it's performing a service for the country. If a line will do that, it will grow!"

Crane nodded, more intent on watching the play of emotion and conviction across Susan Lander's face than listening to her words. She stopped and he realized she was waiting for an answer.

"You're right," he agreed with mock seriousness. "Positively right! But where do I come in? Why tell me this?"

"Because you've got the makings of a stage line!" Susan said. "You've got the coaches and the horses and you're at least a fair driver, yourself. You know the coaching part of it. I know cooking. I know how a friendly house

should be. I think I can take care of the rest of it!"

Crane sat back. The little fool! She actually thought a few Concordes and some horses and a man to drive them made a stage line. She was earnest. She believed she could set up cooks in lonely relay stations. She thought she could provide bedding and linen and friendliness—in places where relay men saw more of storm and Indians than they did of stages!

And she thought a reinsman, a whip, having tasted the untroubled, unhampered life of a driver, would exchange that for the headaches and thankless worries which made good men like Amos Crabb go broke on the rocks of ruthless competition and turn tail on a country to which they had come in good faith and with high hopes!

She was crazy!

But she was cute, too.

Crane had another drink. Then he grinned.

"So we're going to have a stage line. Lander and Crane, partners. That it?"

Susan's eyes pleaded strongly. She nodded. "That's it!" she breathed.

HE PARTED the curtains of the booth and called to Nick Pascoula. When the Greek came, he asked for a pen and paper. With Nick standing in the doorway of the booth, beaming broadly and not at all understanding what transpired, Crane drew up an agreement flowery with all the legal phrases he could remember, organizing a partnership between himself and the girl for the purpose of operating a stage line from points in California to points unknown. When he had finished and had signed the document, he passed the pen to Susan Lander. She signed hurriedly, with triumph in her eyes. Then Crane solemnly made Nick Pascoula add his unreadable script to the bottom as witness. When Nick straightened again, Crane poured him a drink.

"You're a lucky devil, Nick," he said owlishly. "You've had a part in the formation of a great enterprise!"

Nick bowed and rubbed his hands together.

"That's a fact?" he asked with wide pleasure. "I tell about it happened in my restaurant. Just a few people, maybe—it make an impression—"

Crane slapped Pascoula on the shoulder.

"Tell anybody! Tell the whole world! Lander and Crane—watch our dust!"

Nick bowed out. The curtains closed again. Susan folded the partnership agreement carefully and tucked it into her blouse. She was electric with excitement, but she watched Crane narrowly. He saw that the game wouldn't be good much longer. But it had been fun. Better than worrying about what

to do with Crabb's coaches and horses. He could take care of that tomorrow. Tonight it could be just fun.

"Well, what do we do now?" he asked.

"We'll make plans—" Susan said.

Dinner was served. The girl ate with relish and talked, long and swiftly. Crane realized that she had planned long about her stage line, her relay shacks made into comfortable taverns. About comfort on a long run. Sky dreams of the worst kind. Beautiful but impractical—like the girl herself. And they pleased him as she pleased him. He urged her on, nodding and agreeing as though he saw what she painted.

It was late when Nick Pascoula parted the curtains of the booth.

"I'm sorry I disturb, Mr. Crane," he said uneasily. "But I don't like the trouble. And these two, they make the trouble if I don't find you. They want Dave Crane. Somebody say he is here. They come. They won't go away. Business, they say. Maybe it is good, eh?"

Crane rolled back in his seat and waved his hand.

"Business, eh? Sure, send 'em in. This is a night for business—big business! Private offices of Lander and Crane. Send 'em in, Nick!"

Susan Lander looked at the bottle, nearly empty now in front of Crane.

"Maybe tomorrow would be better—" she suggested hurriedly.

Crane shook his head.

"Tonight! Tonight!" he urged. "Business before pleasure! That's our motto, partner!"

Nick backed away and returned in a moment with two men. They didn't stand in the archway of the booth as Nick had done. They shoved in and slid onto two empty seats. Crane's pretense slid away at sight of them. One, a heavy, black-jowled man with unusually small, piercing eyes, was Sam Rockwell. The tall, scar-faced man with him was his San Francisco agent, Fred Haskin.

"Crane, we want to talk to you," Rockwell said.

Crane straightened, regretting for an instant the nearly empty bottle in front of him. Rockwell was smart, as smart as his partner Casey Mason was hard. The two had built their big line out of nothing more than these two qualities.

"We've been gunning for Crabb," Rockwell went on. "You know that. We got him today. But he put one more wiggle over on us. He never owed you anything like the value of those Concords and the stock he signed over to you. Doing that was his way of giving us a parting kick in the teeth. We ain't taking it, Crane! We'll take those coaches and horses off of your hands—for what Crabb owed you. Ten weeks' pay, we hear. One

thousand dollars in cash for that bill of sale!"

Crane understood the rest of it. This wasn't a thing where a man had any choice. It bowed him up, that kind of pressure. But there was common sense in him, too. What the hell could he do with four coaches and a hundred horses? He couldn't drive more than one stage and six horses at a time. If Rockwell and Mason didn't take the stuff off of his hands, nobody else would. Rockwell and Mason were out to corner every line in the state. And there wasn't anybody going to buck them. Crabb's bill of sale was worth close to fifty times a thousand dollars. But Crabb had only owed him a thousand.

"Rockwell, if you've got the cash on you, slap it on the table. Then get to hell out of here. I don't do business when I'm with a lady."

Crane reached for Crabb's bill of sale in his pocket.

ACROSS the table Sue Lander came up out of her seat with her face white and she caught his arm.

"Dave!" she protested.

Crane shook off her grip. This was no time for games.

"You stay out of this!" he told her.

Quick, hot color stung her cheeks.

"You can't sell out, now," she said softly. "Half of that paper belongs to me. We're partners!"

Sam Rockwell looked sharply at the girl. His eyes ran over her figure admiringly. He started to laugh.

"Partners! The devil! So you don't do business when you're with a lady, eh, Crane? Man, you're drunk—but I can't say I blame you." Rockwell turned toward Susan. "Sister, you've done all right," he said. "But this isn't hop-scotch we're playing. This is business. I hate to see your little game busted. But it's got to be, this time. Next time you pick a friend, leave a stage whip alone. There ain't one worth a tear in the lot!"

The stage man reached in his pocket and started counting out bills. Crane put Cobb's bill of sale on the table. Susan snatched it up, thrust it into the blouse along with Crane's partnership agreement, and fought her way out of the booth.

"There's not much law in San Francisco," she said hotly. "But there's enough to back me up in this. Dave Crane can't sell those coaches and horses without my agreement and I say no!"

Rockwell screwed around in his chair impatiently and dropped his hand to Fred Haskin's knee.

"Fred, take Little Wildfire outside and get me those papers. Crane and me'll wait here!"

Haskin stood up and started toward Susan.

Dave Crane kicked his feet under him and came up so sharply that he spilled china from the table.

"Keep your hands off of her, Haskin!"

Rockwell pushed back, too, his eyes narrowing. "Hell, you can't deliver if you ain't got them papers, Dave!" he protested.

"Then I won't sell!" Crane snapped.

Rockwell grinned. Crane knew what that grin meant. He was signaling Haskin to go ahead. And why shouldn't they? Dave Crane was drunk. It would all be all right tomorrow.

Conscious thought had no part in the blow. It was automatic, starting at Crane's knee and swept up, gathering speed. It caught Sam Rockwell under the point of his chin and spilled him out through the curtains of the booth with a jar that shook dust from the beams of Pascoula's building. Other diners turned in startled surprise. Fred Haskin stood half facing Crane, one hand on Susan's angrily trembling shoulder. Dave's hand shot into Haskin's face, a mercilessly hard blow which shattered teeth and spilled him, also.

Nick Pascoula came at a waddling run, waving his hands protestingly. Crane squared in a crouch, watching Rockwell and his agent climb shakenly to their feet. Both were armed; he was not. And both were angry—through the fumes in his head Dave was aware of this, and he was uneasy.

Rockwell stood flatly facing him for a long moment freighted with leashed violence. But there were too many faces in Pascoula's place, too many witnesses. Presently the stage man's body eased. He picked up his hat and nodded a signal toward the door.

"Crane, you busted your own back!" Rockwell said softly. "I'll see you, friend. And you'll holler plenty!"

The two men shouldered for the door. Crane stepped back into the booth, rubbing his knuckles absently, and dropped onto a seat. Susan slid quietly in beside him. He turned his head to look at her. His drunkenness was gone—and his bravado. He felt sick and a fool.

"Four stages and a hundred head of horses. They won't feed me and I sure as hell can't feed them!"

Susan spoke quietly, but there was a ring of confidence in her voice.

"Folks in Marysville want a line to the higher camps, some day even over the divide. We'll go to Marysville and start that line. We'll begin, there. And when we come back to San Francisco, it will be that little-eyed pig who does the hollering!"

Crane remembered that Rockwell had called this girl a tramp. He had, himself, thought that was what she was when he agreed to her timid request for a ride on his box up from San Jose. But he saw, now, that she was

something altogether different. Tramps might be pretty. Occasionally they were. But few of them had a fighting tiger in their eyes.

He knew he was being a fool. He had a feeling that fate and a girl had engineered him into something which would cost him his reputation as a reinsman and a lot of trouble. But Crane had a love of tangles and he knew where Susan Lander went there would be no dullness. He smiled and put his hand down to meet hers.

"All right, partner," he agreed, "it's Marysville. We've asked for trouble. Let's make it good!"

CHAPTER TWO

Stiff-Backed Devil

CRANE came down from his room in the Empire the next morning with a headache but with things pretty well worked out in his mind. He knew that Sue Lander and himself had no real chance of building a line able to compete with Rockwell and Mason, whether they started in San Francisco or Marysville or across the divide in the trackless wastes of the Humboldt Basin. Casey Mason's hired persuaders would search them out and break their hearts with an avalanche of trouble—guns, ditched stages, hold-ups, and burned relays.

But he did believe that they could crowd Rockwell and Mason a little by appearing to set up a competing line. By doing this and stopping short of violence, they might force the other line to up its ante a little. Enough, say, to square off the thousand iron men Crabb had owed him, plus enough to repay the loan Sue and himself would certainly have to make somewhere for a starter, plus a nice little stake for Sue, herself. She had done a lot of planning. And she had a lot of fight. She was entitled to something for her trip to San Francisco. Crane wanted her to have it.

He pushed by habit into Crabb's old office. Three men were there, idling. Their eagerness when he appeared made it obvious they had been waiting for him.

"Hey, Dave!" one of them shouted across the big room. "How's it feel to wear a boss-man's breeches?"

"Lander and Crane," another said. "Nick says it's a big outfit—plenty big. How about a job?"

The third man chimed in.

"Me, too, Dave!" he echoed. "But get it straight. It ain't that we want to work for you. It's because of what Nick said about your partner."

The man paused, grinned. Dave Crane eased onto a desk and grinned back at the trio.

Few men in the trade liked Sam Rockwell and Casey Mason. This dislike had paid Amos Crabb dividends. Because of it he had been able to hire the best whips on the coast, even if he couldn't keep their wages up. A reinsman was a stiff-backed devil for pride. These three were the stiffest of the lot. They'd rather go broke working for a square boss than roll in cash paid out by a cross-eyed son whose guts they hated.

That hatred was going to pay Sue Lander and himself dividends now. These three, always excepting himself, were the best drivers in the west. Gus McKenna was lean and wiry and wore an oversize Stetson to cover his bushy red hair. Clint Stone was horse-faced and bony and convinced that no more handsome man than himself ever lived. And Hack Flaherty, short, fat, and angelic of face was the most dangerous of the three.

"Talk goes fast when it gets to Nick Pas-coula!" Dave said. "Maybe you heard, too, how I got drunk and spit in Sam Rockwell's eye last night?"

McKenna shook his head with exaggerated alarm across his long face.

"Rockwell?" he grunted. "Never heard a word. But if you've crossed Sam Rockwell already, I can see what's coming. I take it back, Dave. You can count me out!"

Clint Stone snorted nervously.

"I ain't committing suicide, either!"

Flaherty put a hand on Dave's shoulder.

"Like to help a pal out, Dave. But you'd ought to learn a lesson. A gent don't get ahead by making trouble. Peace—that's the way, son—peace. I'm out, too!"

"I'd admire to drive a coach for you, son," McKenna offered. "But I don't risk my neck against Casey Mason's guns nor Rockwell's slick plans!"

"Probably wouldn't draw no pay, anyhow—" Clint Stone offered.

"Them that hunts the sword will get it—in the neck!" Flaherty said piously.

Crane scowled impatiently. This was a game. It could go on indefinitely. He had played it himself often enough to know. He had seen Amos Crabb go half crazy under a steady four-way bombardment like this more than once. He had thought it funny. He didn't, now. He wanted an answer and he wanted to get going. There were four coaches and a hundred head of stock he wanted out of San Francisco and on the way to Marysville before Rockwell and his partner decided to clamp down.

Dave felt anger rising up in him. He knew these three were his friends and would resent heat. But he couldn't check it. His impatience

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fanned it on. He stood up sharply. But before he could say anything, the street door pushed open and Sue Lander came into the office. McKenna and Stone and Flaherty stared, but none of them stared harder than Crane, himself.

He had Sue tabbed. He'd seen her in a long, dust-proof travelling dress with a big bonnet pulled down tight on her head. He'd seen her reduced to begging a driver for a ride and he'd heard her sketch a plan in which he still lacked confidence. But she had two papers in her possession which made a plan a reality, as far as she was concerned. She wore a pair of boy's pants, this morning, and a shirt and a wide-brimmed boy's hat. And she walked with a freedom, a confidence no woman in skirts could ever achieve. She smiled brightly at Dave.

"Morning, partner!"

Gus McKenna unloosed a long and marveling oath under his breath. Clint Stone fussed with his shirt-front where a button was missing and turned seven shades of color in quick succession. Flaherty looked, blinked his eyes, and turned hurriedly toward Dave.

"I've thought your proposition over, Mister Crane," he said ponderously. "And it makes no never-mind whether it's drivin' stages or whuppin' polecats you've got in mind, I reckon I'll sign on with Crane—and—and—Lander!"

Stone and Gus McKenna wheeled and shoved their hands out at Crane.

"Dave, old pal!" McKenna breathed with thick and sticky affection. "You've done us a favor!"

Crane laughed. He laughed hard. His three friends stood in an awkward row, grinning sheepishly. Sue Lander, not understanding, looked curiously at her partner. Dave nodded at the three drivers.

"There's your crew, Sue," he said. "Give them their orders."

The girl looked at the three and smiled with friendliness.

"Stick with us and we'll try to do right by you, boys," she said. "My partner and I have big plans. But we'll start slowly. We have four coaches and a hundred head of driving stock at Mr. Crabb's corrals. We want those taken up to Marysville. We'll meet you there—say at Mr. Levy's store day after tomorrow."

"Four coaches and a hundred head?" Clint Stone said. "Why, ma'am, there's three of us to handle that little dab! We'll be at Sol Levy's store tomorrow night!"

CRANE had been puzzled when Sue chose a mercantile store for rendezvous. Her reason was apparent when Dave and herself reached Marysville the next day. Levy's store was a neat building on the main

street, and there was much traffic through its door. Crane and the girl pushed through the crowd inside toward a round, fat little man with thick-lensed glasses, quick, nervous movements and a perpetual genial smile.

Sol Levy was busy with customers. But when he looked up and saw Sue, he left them. A moment later he thrust Dave and the girl into a littered office. He threw pudgy arms around Sue.

"Susan Lander—little girl!" he said. "For old eyes a good sight. Mamma has worried since you left us. It was Mamma told your father we would look after you. Now you have come back!" He paused and looked at Crane over the rims of his glasses. "And this?"

"Mr. Dave Crane, Sol—my partner! Dave, this is Sol Levy, a better friend than even a father could be!"

The little man's eyes clung to Dave. Crane saw that this storekeeper had heard of Dave Crane, reinsman. There were some things he might have heard—Crane colored a little.

"Partner?" Sol Levy said uneasily. Crane saw the shrewd old eyes dart to Susan Lander's ring finger. The girl laughed again.

"Not that, you silly old goose!" she protested. "This is strictly business—and on paper! I told you, Sol, that I'd have a part of a stage line out of Marysville before too long. Well, I have it, now. We've got Concord for the line; we've got horses and drivers. All we need now is a little of Levy's luck!"

Sol turned back to her.

"Levy's luck?" he squeaked. "Levy doesn't have luck—ah—see what you mean! A minx you are, Sue Lander. Levy's luck—Levy's cash, it is, you little trickster. Ask Mamma, Sue. I don't do nothing without Mamma."

Susan winked at Dave. High joy was in her eyes.

"It's Lander, Crane, and Levy, now!" she said. And her tone was triumphant.

SOL LEVY was a businessman. Having agreed to buy into the nebulous thing Sue Lander swore was a stage line, he was eager to do his part. By the time Gus McKenna and the other two ex-Crabb drivers arrived with the coaches and the stock, he had been through Marysville with Crane and they had corrals, a big barn, and office quarters on lease. They had a contract out for feed and word was running up the Sierra slopes that a new line was looking for relay stations and men to staff them.

Crane had been puzzled at the relationship between the Levys and Sue Lander. It cleared rapidly. The old couple in the store were lonely. They had known Sue's people in younger days, before they moved west to California. Sue's mother had been dead for

years. When her father died, he had sent her to them and she had filled an empty place in their lives.

Levy's active participation in the forming of the line complicated Crane's own plans in the beginning. He wanted only enough activity to make Rockwell and Mason uneasy—to prod Sam Rockwell into making another and better offer for the inventory of gear he had acquired from Amos Crabb. Anything else was a waste of time and effort.

He mentioned once to Levy that they were biting off a pretty big chunk of trouble, opening a line in competition to Rockwell and Mason. Old Sol's answer was typical.

"Trouble! I tell you, Dave Crane, a man never goes broke taking a profit! If he's got trouble, he's got trouble. Good things come hard. If it shows profit, who cares about trouble, eh? Susan says we get rich. We do it for Susan, then!"

Crane couldn't answer that kind of a return. He evaded it with a noncommittal reply. Bucking Rockwell and Mason at all was risky. It was true he had decided to crowd the big line a little in the hopes of making the girl a stake. But there was a limit to everything.

He watched Levy's investment in Sue's plan uneasily, afraid that the store man would get in so deep that the ten-thousand-dollar bid he aimed to hold out for wouldn't cover it by the time Sam Rockwell broke down. Sam might go that high. Crane was betting he would if he were handled right. But there was a lid, and where money wouldn't work or the cost was too high, Rockwell and Mason would as willingly spend lead—with powder to drive it.

It was thin ice, and it was getting thinner. Half a dozen times in the next two weeks, Crane came close to bolting out of the whole thing. He had lost a thousand dollars—which was his personal stake in this—more than once at a single sitting at a San Francisco game table. Sue Lander was a girl worth stepping over a line to help. But Crane knew how many other girls there were in California and he didn't like the way things shaped at Marysville.

The girl, herself, seemed unaware that she was deliberately planning to step into a business Sam Rockwell and Casey Mason had marked for their own. She was eager, as though she had some secret foreknowledge that she couldn't lose. She chided Dave for his glumness and planned into late hours with Sol and Mrs. Levy. Gus McKenna and Stone and Hack Flaherty often sat with them.

Dave walked the street by day—talking to men who were willing to go out to posts along the vague track over the Sierra to establish relay stations. He spoke to small hill-country ranchers who would furnish the line

with lots of feed, set down at various stations. These were gestures of a man who was building something, but Crane's attention was not on them.

He watched other things, instead. For instance, the Levys and Sue and his own three former fellow drivers did not know when



Sam Rockwell and Fred Haskin arrived in Marysville. When he told them about the arrival, they paid little attention. Two days later he saw Casey Mason and a pock-marked, gun-hung man, whom inquiry revealed as a Pete Biglow. This news drew no comment from his partners, either.

A helpless feeling tightened Crane up. He was worried. And that was funny; Dave Crane had always sworn that only a fool worried. If he had a problem, a good man either closed with it or ran away. Yet he could do neither. Rockwell and Mason hadn't come to Marysville for the climate. He knew that. But no one else would see it.

Then the last straw fell. The postmaster told Dave about it.

JIM BIRCH was coming. That was something. It was big news. And it meant a swift head of trouble. Birch was already a legend. If a single man would ever be able to stretch a line of rolling wheels from the Missouri to California, Birch would be that man. He was not cut to the heroic pattern of those who lived long in history, but he was

a builder. If he were forgotten by the country at large a dozen years after the rails came, men who knew stages would still remember Jim Birch and his Overland, spanning the continent for the first time.

The postmaster had the gossip cold. Birch's plans were about complete. He had but one gap to bridge in his system—the gap between Marysville and Nevada stations beyond the Sierra and the Humboldt Sink, and he was ready to close it.

This, then, was why Sam Rockwell and Mason and a couple of their best men were lying over in Marysville. Crane wondered if this weren't also why Sue and Sol Levy and the others had paid him scant attention in recent days. He found Sue in Levy's store and drew her into the littered little office.

SUE'S eyes were dancing when he finished. "Of course Jim Birch is coming here!" she said. "Why else do you think I wanted us to set up a run over the Sierra from Marysville? I've known for weeks that Mr. Birch was looking for a line to fill the last hole in his Overland system. Sol had a letter from him before I went to San Jose. I didn't tell you, Dave. I didn't want you to know. You're funny. Jim Birch is a big man. I was afraid you'd shy away from him!"

Crane grunted.

"I'm funny!" he mocked. "This whole thing won't do, Sue! We can't be in shape to operate by the time Birch gets here. We can't make any impression on him. He wants a tried and proved outfit. This Overland idea of his is no gamble. Our outfit is!"

"You haven't been keeping track, Dave!" Sue charged lightly. "Sol and I and the boys have been busy. I haven't got cooks for all the stations, yet. There's a couple of places where we'll have to drive double-distances until we can get a station set up and stock quartered. But we're ready to start carrying passengers, now. Sol took posters to the printers today. They'll be on the streets tomorrow!"

Crane shook his head.

"It won't do."

"It has to, Dave! How else are we going to get your money back out of the stuff Amos Crabb gave you?"

Sue looked hurt, as though he had robbed her surprise of its fun. She pushed past him out into the store again. Crane followed her in a moment and turned out into the street. He was angry. He had been playing along with the girl's enthusiasm, believing he was doing her a favor—humoring her and gambling that he could squeeze enough out of Sam Rockwell in the end to make it pay a little for her. He wanted her to know that. He wanted her to realize that the firm of Lander, Crane and Levy was a product of a

reinsman's capricious chivalry, born on the spur of a moment because one Dave Crane had wanted to do something for a pretty-faced girl who had pleased him.

He knew now that Sue would be shocked if he tried to tell her this and would only think that he was crawling. Crane wasn't a crawling kind. Neither was he a fool who would deliberately walk into a competition so savage it had frozen out a man as stiff-backed as Amos Crabb had been.

There was one answer. He had been playing a waiting game, hoping for a little bigger stake before he tossed down cards he knew were worthless. But he couldn't afford to wait any longer. If Sam Rockwell wouldn't come to him, he'd have to go to Sam.

Since the night of the dinner at Nick Pas-coula's, Dave had not had a dozen drinks. Partly because he was too busy for the leisure competent drinking requires and partly because he could still remember how Sue had looked at the lowering bottle on the table between them at Nick's. He wasn't sure whether he was afraid of her displeasure or whether he remembered that drinking a little too heavily in her company had brought on the recklessness which had made him declare her his partner.

But he needed a drink, now. He could use a few.

HALF an hour after he left Levy's store, Hack Flaherty came into the saloon where Dave stood against the bar. Flaherty spoke genially, but there was pressure in his voice.

"Don't get reckless, Dave," he urged. "Go easy, tonight. Birch is due tomorrow. We want to put a good foot forward. We've got the inside track, seeing as old Levy's Jim Birch's friend. We want to keep it. We've hung a lot on this. Go easy!"

Dave turned and stared flatly at his friend. "You're a damned fool, Hack," he said coldly. "And you can't see farther'n the end of your nose. You're forgetting that you're drawing my pay—that I'm your boss—that there's somebody else besides Levy and Sue Lander in this cardboard stage line. Order yourself up a bottle and shut up or get out of here and leave me alone!"

The skin around Flaherty's lips tightened and went white.

"I'm not forgetting anything, Dave—not even this!" he said quietly. "It's not me that's the fool. I don't give a particular damn about your stage line. What whip ever gave a hoot in hell for his boss? But when a man crosses the kind of partners you've got—"

Flaherty bit his words off, turned, and stalked out of the saloon. Crane followed him twenty minutes later, hot with too much whis-

key, a savage temper running through him.

He crossed the street to avoid Levy's store on the way back up through town and when he came abreast the offices of Rockwell and Mason, he turned abruptly in.

Sam Rockwell was alone in the front room, but a moment after Crane entered, Mason and Fred Haskin and the man called Biglow filed in from somewhere in the rear of the building. Mason crossed over and quietly kicked the street door, which Dave had left open, closed. Sam Rockwell nodded at Dave but said nothing. The others appeared to be waiting.

Crane felt the impact of the four, but he braced himself on wide-planted feet.

"Jim Birch gets in tomorrow—" he said.

Rockwell nodded.

"We expected him."

"And you expect to tie this section of Rockwell and Mason's lines into his Overland system?"

Rockwell nodded again.

"It's all set."

Crane grinned tightly.

"You're sure, Sam? You're sure there won't be any competition?"

Rockwell pulled open a drawer in his desk and drew out a roll of stiff paper.

"Sure as hell, Crane," he answered. "But then, we aren't worrying much about this—"

He unrolled the paper and tossed it across. Dave's eyes dropped to it. He saw it was an elaborate poster, the ink on which was barely dry, advertising the inaugural run of Lander, Crane and Levy stages between Marysville and Genoa Station, Grass Valley, Nevada—the poster Sue had said was not to be released until morning. Rockwell smiled.

"The printer's smart enough to know who's boss in this town, Crane. He thought we'd want to see this. You're a good driver, Crane. I've heard it argued you're the best whip in the state. You ought to be smart enough to know this won't go. We've been working a long time to be big enough to interest Birch when he finally got the Overland ready to go. We're not going to lose out on that, now!"

Crane nodded.

"This is the first I've seen of that poster," he said slowly. "I didn't even know about it till an hour ago. I'm not crazy. A line that's just starting to turn wheels the day Jim Birch hits its run hasn't got a leg to stand on with him. But the stuff you tried to buy out from me is worth more than a thousand dollars. I don't want all that it's worth. But I want enough to cover me and my partners."

Rockwell leaned forward.

"So that's it!" he said. And Crane thought there was vague relief in the man's voice. "You didn't aim to fight! Just prodding us for a little more money, eh? How much, Crane?"

"Ten thousand—not one!"

Rockwell folded his hands and spun his swivel chair so that he faced his partner.

"What you say, Casey?"

Mason smiled thinly.

"A box of shells is a hell of a lot cheaper than that, Sam!" He shrugged. "But the office end is yours, Sam," he said. "If we get fifty thousand dollars worth of rolling stock for ten, we can't kick, I reckon."

Rockwell swiveled back.

"Kill that poster and get a three-way signature onto a bill of sale, Crane. I'll have the cash here for you in an hour."

Relief exploded in Crane. He had been willing to stand a steeper bluff than this. He had expected Rockwell and Mason to get tough, seeing the deadline so close. He had been half afraid that it was too late, that Rockwell had turned Lander, Crane, and Levy over to Casey Mason for disposal. But this was the hump—and he was over it.

"I'll be here, Rockwell!" he promised. He started for the door. Casey Mason stopped him.

"In case you run into argument, Crane," the man said quietly, "keep this hint in mind. Sol Levy's a nice old gent. He's got friends. That Lander girl and Sol's old woman both set a store by him. It'd be a pity if something happened to him account of his getting into the wrong business!"

A QUARTER of an hour later, Dave Crane stood in Levy's little office, repeating those words with desperate persuasion. Sol and Mrs. Lavy were there—and Sue. So were Dave's three old friends from Amos Crabb's line. They heard him through. When he had finished, Hack Flaherty spoke softly.

"Casey Mason ain't the only gent in these hills that's got a hook in his trigger finger!"

Mrs. Levy was pale, but she made no protest. Sol sputtered angrily.

"A threat they make! Then I make it back! We don't kill but I tell you, for sure now I know we get the contract with Birch. Jim is my friend. I promise him we make good runs and on schedule. I tell him what kind of business Rockwell and Mason do. We get the contracts they want. Maybe that shows them, eh?"

Sue crossed to Dave, her eyes accusing.

"I knew a lot about you, partner," she said quietly. "I knew you were puffed like a pigeon and that only your own skin counted. But I thought you were a stage man—that rolling wheels over new country would be important to you. I banked on that. I banked on your fighting!"

"This whole thing was crazy!" Dave snapped. "I knew it from the start, but I stuck to it for you. I thought you had something coming. But when it gets to a place it'll hurt folks like Sol and his missus and boys like Gus and Clint and Hack, I'm letting go. You and Sol will have seven or eight thousand dollars to split between you for a few weeks work. Isn't that enough?"

"If all I wanted was money, it would be more than enough, Dave!" Sue Lander said sharply. "But I told you I wanted to build a stage line, I wanted to see something grow that this country needed. Rockwell and Mason are bluffing. Even if they weren't, seeing Birch get the right kind of service for this section of his Overland is worth the risk!"

Crane shook his head.

"Not for me!" he snapped. "I've been a fool long enough. I'm out. You owe me a thousand dollars. You can pay it someday if there's enough left out of the wreckage. It's Lander and Levy, now. And you're on your own!"

CHAPTER THREE

Fight or Run

DAVE packed a saddle roll and rode down Marysville's main street. He stopped and swung down in front of Rockwell and Mason's building. The four men he had left there were still waiting. A thick envelope was on Sam Rockwell's desk and Crane saw that his own name was written across the front of it.

"Well, Crane?" Rockwell asked.

Dave shook his head.

"I couldn't make your deal, Sam," he said, "so I made one of my own. I'm out of it. But you've still got competitors. Fight it out with them. Two lines can't run one route. I know that. Jim Birch'll make a choice. I've got no stake and I don't care how it goes. But I wanted to warn you. Let Levy and Sue Lander be. Let them start their line. And when you fight, fight by the book. Step over the line and I'll hunt you down!"

"Crane, you didn't scare us bad when you had title to that stock we want; you rattle like an empty tin bucket now. And how come you're so nervous? We're business men, Casey and me. By the book—we always deal by the book! We've got a better line than that girl

and old Levy can build overnight. They'll fold soon enough—with Birch here to watch them do it. We just aim to sit and watch them, that's all. Smooth your fur, Crane!"

Casey Mason leaned forward indolently. "Smooth your fur—and get out of town! We're nice boys. We wouldn't harm a girl and an old trader. But we might get rough with a renegade whip that sports breeches he ain't man enough to fill!"

Crane backed out of the office, angry with himself and bitter with helplessness. There was nothing more he could say—nothing further he could do. He was outside the picture framed in Rockwell and Mason's sights. He had saved his skin. They understood his doing this. But once he was gone, they wanted him long gone; there would be no coming back. Rockwell and Mason and their hired guns would see to that, just as they'd see to the obstacles still facing them in Marysville—Sol Levy and Sue.

Dave wasn't taken in by Rockwell's velvety smoothness. Sam and his partner had built their line by cold-deck dealing. They were now gambling for their biggest stake and they'd fight the same way. Grim trouble faced Lander and Levy, trouble no less grim because it would strike under cover. Rockwell and Mason would not risk prejudicing their chances with Birch by open warfare. But neither would they sit back as Sam had promised.

Crane mounted his horse again, thinking that no man could hold himself responsible for the troubles of others. There were too many troubles in a growing country. A man's judgement was all he had. He should stick to it, avoiding those things against which his judgement warned him. If others would not heed this warning, it was their luck which ran thin. . . .

Dave Crane thought he could make this stick. But he couldn't.

CRANE was at Partridge Flat, only two hours of hard riding from Marysville, when Rockwell and Mason made their first move. Dave had been expecting something for four days. Word drifted hourly down the trail from Marysville. Jim Birch had arrived there scant hours after Dave's own departure. The great stageman put up at the hotel and rode daily out along proposed routes or talked with men who knew the country and could understand staging problems.

Lander and Levy, a new, local little outfit, had started runs over Nevitt's Summit to Genoa, Nevada. The second and the third round trips of Lander and Levy stages were made without trouble. Jim Birch was seen often at Sol Levy's store. Gossip was that Levy was Birch's friend and that the master

of the great Overland might pass up Rockwell and Mason's big string to take the local. Crane heard these things uneasily. He began to wonder if his judgement were wrong. Maybe Sam Rockwell and his partner actually weren't going to hit low. Maybe Sue and old Levy had a chance.

Then the news of the accident at Levy's store came down. There wasn't much to the report. A can of blasting powder in the warehouse back of Levy's store had let go. The warehouse was scattered all over Marysville. A portion of the store had been destroyed, too. And it had been a bad thing. The store had been jammed with customers. Marysville's doctor was a busy man.

Crane cornered the man who brought the news and grilled him desperately. But the man had left town without finding out more than this. He thought a few of the injured were dead. He had heard that Jim Birch, himself, had been hurt. But he had no other names. Crane could get no word of Flaherty and Clint Stone and Gus McKenna—or Sol and his wife, or Sue. All of these might well have been in the store.

Crane hurriedly saddled his horse, with one certain knowledge. Sol Levy was too wise a mercantile man to carelessly stow blasting powder. And well-stowed powder would not fire by itself. A blast was spectacular. It could easily be managed under cover. And it was more effective than a bullet in the back or a shot in the dark. It did great damage and would shake a brave man as much as a coward. This accident at Marysville bore the unmistakable hand-mark of Casey Mason!

Crane swore to himself on the ride back up the trail that the urgency which drove him was his fear over the fate of people who had been friends. But he knew this was only half the truth. He was riding back, too; toward a fight he had once dodged. He didn't, he told himself, give a damn whether Lander and Levy lived or died as a business outfit. But this was not wholly so. Sue and old Levy had linked their dream of an honest little line to the greater one growing under the earnest magic in the hands of James E. Birch.

Operators like Rockwell and Mason were building for profit. Birch—and Sue Lander—were building for the country. Not wholly pleased and unable to combat it, Dave Crane rode back to Marysville with the knowledge he wanted a place in their fight.

IT WAS well after dark when Crane hammered a blown and heaving mount into the familiar street of the terminal town. It was strangely quiet. Two men were on guard at the rear of Levy's boarded up store. One of them was short and heavy and wore a stained bandage slanting back under his hat. Crane

reined in toward him and flung himself down.

The short man watched him approach. His grim face showed no recognition. Crane grabbed the man's arm.

"Hack! Is Sue all right—and Levy and the other two boys?"

Flaherty stared past Dave.

"A gent'll get callouses on his belly from crawling around so much!" he observed with stony impersonalness. "Be-damned if I'll give answer to a man that quits when he's crowded! You was wanted here, Dave. You was needed bad. But you turned down hill. You should have kept going. You ain't wanted, now!"

Crane growled and shook his friend. Hack tore his shoulder from the grip, took a backward step, and jerked up his rifle. Dave heard the hammer set on its ratchet.

"You heard me!" Hack snapped. "You've busted the gal up enough. You ain't wanted. Get moving—back where you crawled from!"

Crane fell back. He remembered his own savagery with this friend in the saloon a few days ago. He would not take this crowding from any man living; but he took it now from Flaherty because he thought he deserved it in part. Hack was not a man to forget things easily. Dave Crane had shown a running stripe and having shown it, he'd ought to stick to it. There were few among the brotherhood of the six-stranded ribbons who owned yellow bellies. Those who did were scorned. Hack was right, according to his lights. Besides, Crane had ridden here to get the straight news of the blast at Levy's.

Dave circled back to the front of the store. A man was pacing back and forth under the awning over the boarded windows, his head down as though in deep thought. Crane saw one of the man's hands was bandaged.

At the sound of Crane's step, the other turned. He saw a stranger, which was not surprising in view of the numbers of men pouring up the Sierra valleys toward the golden magnet in the higher hills. He was a big man; big and young and strikingly handsome. The thought struck Crane that here was another hard-headed visionary, probably a New England trader, come West to build a fortune.

He asked "Were you around when this blast went?"

The big man nodded.

"I'm looking for Sol Levy and a girl called Susan Lander and a couple of men called Stone and McKenna. Were they in it?"

"Friends of yours?"

Crane made an impatient sign of agreement. Some sign of how close friends these were must have showed on his face.

"You look like trouble," the big man suggested.

"I am—for the lads that fired that powder!" Dave snapped. "And I want to know the tally before I start paying it off!"

Interest sharpened on the stranger's face. "You think that charge was deliberately set?"

"I can do everything but prove it!"

"By whom?"

Dave scowled impatiently.

"When I ask a man something, I want an answer!" he snapped. "Tell me what happened to those I asked about. If you still want to know about that blast, just follow me around. I'll have every man that had to do with it in the sights of my gun before I'm done!"

The stranger smiled tightly.

"Did you ever wheel a stage, friend?" he asked. Dave's temper frayed swiftly.

"The name is Crane—Dave Crane," he bit out.

That seemed a good enough answer. The stranger nodded.

"The best on the coast," he said. "I knew it! A whip is a kind of man all his own. I'll watch you, Crane. I want to know who you get in your sights. Your friends got out of that explosion with luck and scratches, all but one. Sol Levy's wife was after potatoes in the warehouse when it went. They've never found her."

This big stranger puzzled Dave, but he had no time for the man, now. Mamma Levy—dead! Dave wheeled, ran down the steps, and turned up the street toward the leased office of Lander and Levy. Sue undid the lock when he rattled the door. She did not seem surprised to see him.

"Come in, Dave," she offered. "I've been expecting you."

Crane stepped through the door. Sol was not in sight. He was probably in back, where quarters for the drivers had been set up. McKenna and Stone sat in a corner. They stared at him truculently. Sue touched his arm.

"I've been expecting you, Dave. But I've got to know something. Why did you come back?"

There was a sharp rap on the door. Stone went across and opened it a crack.

"Dave Crane in here?" a voice asked. Stone nodded.

"Then give him this—"

A folded sheet of paper was thrust through. Stone took it, closed the door and handed it to Dave. Dave opened it, glanced at it and thrust it into his pocket.

"Why did I come back?" he repeated. "To take up a promise I made. To do a little business with Sam Rockwell and Casey Mason!"

Sue grabbed his other arm.

"No, Dave!" she protested. "This blast was an accident. Even Sol agrees it must have been. It nearly killed Jim Birch, him-

self. Rockwell and Mason wouldn't have risked that. We're playing square. We're not having any violence. It's not our way, Dave. We want to get that Birch contract away from Sam Rockwell. But if we do, we'll do it with turning wheels and not with guns!"

Dave said softly, "So Casey Mason can't make an 'accident', eh?"

"He didn't, Dave. Don't go wild on this. He didn't!"

"No?" Crane smiled mirthlessly and pawed the slip of paper which had just been delivered to him from his pocket.

"Then, why this?"

Sue opened the sheet and read slowly:

"Crane: When you come out that door, start for your horse. Get on it and ride out of town. Make one bad move and you know the answer. They'll find your body, but you'll be just as dead as the old lady."

Sue stared, paling. Dave knew why. Casey Mason had a beautiful pen hand of which he was proud. And even in an unsigned note he could not resist the flourishes which tabbed its author as clearly as a full signature. Sue's eyes lifted to the door. Crane thought that only in this minute had the girl fully realized the kind of men against whom she had so eagerly pitted herself—that only now she realized death and violence were assets in which Rockwell and Mason had long been dealing.

"They're out there, now—" she breathed.

Dave nodded and shifted the belt at his hips.

"Waiting for me," he agreed. "And I'm not one to keep even dogs waiting!"

Sue tried to catch his arm again—tried to halt him. Stone and Gus McKenna came half out of their seats. Dave thought Gus had barked a gruff warning. But he shoved on past the girl, caught the trip of the door-lock, and jerked the panel open.

CRANE stepped swiftly through the door, pulling it shut behind him. The effect to a watcher along the street was a momentary flash of light, that was all. A flash hardly long enough to clearly line the silhouette of the man who stepped through the opening. As Crane hit the walk outside, he went a pair of yards to the right along the front of the building and dropped into a crouch.

If Casey Mason had sent a nervous gun out to get him, he would have drawn a shot. That none winked at him in those first seconds pleased Dave. Maybe Casey himself was doing the powder work tonight. He hoped so. He stayed in his crouch for forty or fifty seconds, then started moving again. This drew a shot which brushed Dave's right elbow and buried itself angrily in the planking at his back. Dave kept on moving, turning out toward the street.

He was grinning tightly. His eyes had

grown adjusted to the darkness and he had spotted his man. It wasn't Mason. The man was standing easily erect between a closed saloon and an old harness shop, neither of which had awnings in front of them and pillars to obstruct his view of the street.

The distance was seventy yards, more or less. Too much for Crane. A whip by necessity has a good eye and quick hands. But Crane knew his own limitations. He was no magician with a gun, even in good light. His feet went down from the walk into the dust of the street. He moved swiftly at a crouching half-run. The man across the track squared around a little so that his gun arm would rest against the corner of the building beside him.

Crane fired without care and flung splinters close enough to the gunman to jerk him away from the building. The man seemed undecided for a moment, but still unhurried. Suddenly he moved forward, his stocky body coming out from the shadows of the building into the open. Dave saw that he was Biglow.

A few doors scattered along the street had come open at the sound of gunfire. Dave caught the gunman's silhouette against one of these and fired again. Biglow veered but came on with unbroken stride. And almost instantly, he returned the shot. Crane felt its sting, but he felt no jolt. He swore and counted his strides. Four more and he'd be close enough to be sure.

Biglow fired again, showing the first signs of haste. He spilled Dave. Crane thought a part of his shoe had been torn away, but he didn't take time to look. He scrambled to his feet. Biglow fired twice more, rapidly, and Crane felt a burning stab in his left arm. He took one more step and halted with his feet wide apart. Biglow loomed large in front of him. Barely thirty yards lay between them, now.

Crane's gun felt comfortably heavy and it seemed to swing in an etched groove. He aimed and fired without effort. Muzzle-flame winked and the recoil eased into his shoulders. His thumb reached back the hammer again, but his caution was needless. Biglow turned slowly and fell.

Dave felt no elation. He had no score against the man and drew no satisfaction in his death. It was like kicking a man's dog. The man, himself, was not hurt. With his gun still leveled, Crane moved on up the center of the street until he was abreast the open door against which he had caught Biglow's silhouette. Casey Mason was framed in it. Sam Rockwell's heavy face was at his shoulder.

"You picked your game, Mason," Dave charged savagely. "Might as well finish it, now. I'm waiting for both of you!"

Mason stood without moving for a run of seconds. Finally he spoke in a rasping, shaken voice.

"What the hell are you talking about, Crane? You're drunk! Go sleep it off!"

The door slammed shut.

Crane waited a moment longer, saw enough crowd gathering to prevent Mason or Rockwell from trying a back shot. He turned down toward Lander and Levy's office. He was still holding his gun in his hand when he stepped into the room he had just quitted. He limped a little, and blood made a wristlet on his left arm. He had lost his hat when Biglow spilled him and the dust of the street grimed one side of his face.

SUE'S face blanched when she saw him. "You—you killed him!"

Crane nodded his head grimly and she shook her head with disbelief. Dave saw that she still did not accept the explosion at the store as the work of enemies. He saw she was convinced that it was Dave, himself—not Rockwell and Mason—who had set a precedent of violence. She was stubborn. Crane cursed it. He moved closer, intending to argue with her, and a big hand dropped on his arm and pulled him around.

"You're dead sure of that blast—and of yourself, aren't you, Crane?" a voice asked. Crane jerked his head around. The stranger from the porch of the store was standing beside him. Dave freed his arm.

"As sure as I am I'm getting tired of your blasted questions!" he snapped. "This is a private office. What made you think you could walk in here?"

The stranger grinned. Gus McKenna had been fingering the torn sleeves over Dave's wounded arm. He looked up now and smiled drily.

"Better meet a gent afore you square off to fight him, son," Gus said gently. "I'd admire introducing you to a man you ought to know. Dave, this is Mister James E. Birch!"

Crane sucked his breath in sharply and wheeled on Sue.

"Then you've got the contract to carry the Overland through here. It's in the bag! No wonder Rockwell and Mason have opened the gates on you!"

Sue started a denial but Birch interrupted her.

"I've given Miss Lander and my old friend Levy my sympathy, Crane," he said. "But a big stage line has to be built on something more solid than that. I haven't awarded the Overland contract, yet. I've heard pretty bad gossip about Sam Rockwell and his partner, but nothing concrete. If you could prove what you've said about them in connection with the explosion in Levy's store, they'd be

out. The contract would have to go to Lander and Levy. But a few minutes ago Miss Lander told me she didn't believe her competitors had anything to do with that. And if she did believe it, she wouldn't tell me, now. Miss Lander is a stage man, Crane. She wants her line to win on merit and she's going to have her chance—along with Rockwell and Mason.

Dave caught the girl's hand.

"This is your chance, Sue!" he begged. "Mr. Birch will give you what you've wanted. You can run your stages over the Sierra as a part of the Overland. That's enough for even you. We can prove Sam and his partner fired that blast. I'll bring one of them in here and make him swear to it. Then the thing'll be done!"

Sue pulled away. "No, Dave. You don't give orders here anymore. You're forgetting that. You'd go out on the street again. You'd kill or get killed and there'd only be more trouble. A gun won't prove anything. Stage lines are more than the people who build them. They have to stand on their own ability and efficiency.

"At daybreak tomorrow we'll run our coaches across the summit. Rockwell and Mason will do the same. The one which makes the best time, gives its passengers the smoothest ride, and comes in with its teams in the best shape gets the contract. That was Mr. Birch's offer. Sam Rockwell and myself have both agreed to it."

"Then let me drive for you!" Dave begged, but Sue shook her head.

"You'd raise our chances, Dave," she said. "I know that. So do the boys. Once I wouldn't have felt right without you on the box, but not now. The boys stuck by the line. You didn't. The drive is split in three. Hack Flaherty takes the first section, Clint the second, and Gus will roll over the pass."

Crane scowled desperately.

"Then I'll go as passenger—"

Sue smiled wryly.

"There'll be room. Marysville doesn't seem to think we'll do so well. The mayor's riding with Rockwell's driver. You and I started this. Why shouldn't you ride over the summit with Sol and me?"

"If there's room I might bring a friend," Crane prodded. The girl nodded incuriously. "And I may go up for a look at a part of the trail tonight. Pick me up somewhere around the first relay."

Sue made no answer to this. Crane turned back for the door. Gus McKenna moved with him.

"Get a bandage on that arm, Dave," the red-haired man counseled. "You're bleedin'. And be mighty careful what kind of a friend you take with you into that carriage. Miss Sue's going to get Jim Birch's contract if

Hack and Clint and me have to tote her coach across the summit on our backs!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Whips and Wheels

CRANE had his foot and arm doctored; then crossed to a little eating place and ate ravenously. By the time he was booted and ready to ride again, two hours had passed.

He kept a careful watch along the street. Birch and a company of men he guessed to be judges for the coming race left early. Soon after them Casey Mason led a crew of a dozen men out of town. Much later, Sam Rockwell and Fred Haskin left. Crane followed them. The pieces of this pattern were all in the night, now.

Crane overtook Rockwell and his companion half a dozen miles below Lander and Levy's first relay point. He gave them little warning, riding suddenly upon them from behind. Haskin seemed to know he was doomed. He put up a bitter fight which cost Dave his horse. Rockwell watched Haskin go down with half of his head shot away and sat woodenly while Dave drew his gun from his belt. Crane swung up on Haskin's mount and headed up trail with Sam Rockwell riding pale and sullen ahead of him a prisoner.

At sun-up they were crouched down in a thicket around the first turn above the Lander and Levy station and some two miles below the one set up by Rockwell and Mason. It was a long wait, bitter with uncertainties. Dave remembered other moves he would have made in this fight, moves which had been blocked by Sue in her belief that any stageman's battle could be won with whips and wheels. He wasn't sure how this last desperate plan might work. If it failed, if Sue blocked him again—

Rockwell and Mason's coach was in the lead on the first stretch. It rocked past the place where Dave crouched with his prisoner, loaded with citizens of Marysville who reluctantly believed they had chosen the winning line. Hack Flaherty tooled his Concord up to the station below Crane's hiding place, three or four minutes later. The change of teams was swift. But there was fumbling and Dave swore at it. The men too eager to do their jobs—men working for a woman were like that!

The stage came rushing on presently. It was nearly abreast when Crane dragged Sam Rockwell out into the track and threw up his hands. There was a flurry of dust and the coach bobbed as Hack came down on the brake. Flaherty leaned far down from the box, staring at Rockwell's sullen face.

"What the hell, Dave—"

Crane jerked open the door, thrust Rockwell stumblingly into the coach.

"Let her roll, son!" He swung in himself as the Concord lurched forward again.

Rockwell sank back into his seat. "You can't get away with this, Crane— Casey's up the way, waiting. When I—"

Sue Lander cut him off. "We're a half mile from your station. We'll let you off there."

She moved over to the window to call out to Flaherty. Crane caught her and pulled her firmly back.

"Rockwell rides all the way," he snapped.

His voice was hard and there was a look in his eyes which caused Sue to refuse him argument. He glanced at the other occupants of the coach. Sol Levy bore heavy marks in evidence of what the explosion in the back of his store had cost him. But the round little man's spirit was unbent. He ignored Dave for the moment but spoke quietly to the girl.

"We need a good luck piece, Susan," he said. "Maybe this is it, eh?"

Clint Stone and McKenna, on the other seat, said nothing when Dave dropped down beside them. But he saw amused admiration for the stroke which had made Sam Rockwell a passenger in the coach he so desperately wanted to beat.

At the Rockwell and Mason relay, Dave forced Rockwell onto his knees in the body of the coach so that he would not be seen when they flashed by. Half an hour later they had covered the first third of the run and had drawn up to within a hundred yards of the leading coach.

Flaherty, bitter at losing even a yard of

gained ground, hailed Clint Stone to crawl out for a rolling change. Clint crawled out the window, swung precariously onto the roof and dropped into the box. Flaherty stayed on top with him. An hour later a quick change of teams at the second station put Clint onto the road fast enough to get him past the Rockwell and Mason coach at its own station beyond.

DAVE CRANE had been riding easily, content that silence rode with him. His mind was working against a problem and he was grateful he did not have friction with Sue and the others to distract him. When they passed the other coach, he stiffened. So long as Rockwell and Mason were leading, it was unlikely that anything would happen. But with positions now reversed, there should be trouble. Sam Rockwell seemed to sense it, too. Dave saw the man watching the road ahead.

When the trouble did come, it was almost at the two-thirds mark on the way to the summit, nearly time for McKenna to take his turn with the ribbons—and it came suddenly. The track wound into a canyon cut through a thick growth of pine. A narrow timber canyon on a gentle grade where little could go wrong. Dave saw the timber dropping—

The sapling, perhaps six inches through at the butt, fell almost horizontally, so that, at stage-height, it made a barrier across the road. Clint Stone must have seen it coming, also. He yelled and Dave felt the coach surge as he touched his wheelers with the whip in hope of getting enough speed to get under it. But the drop had been timed perfectly.

**YOU CAN'T
HURT MY
FEELINGS!**

**I KNOW IT
- I USE
STAR BLADES!**



The sapling landed across the brake rail of the box and crashed back into the coach. The coach rocked crazily and one corner of it dropped down at a steep angle as a thorough-brace gave way, its thick, stout leather sheared by the force of the impact. The coach slewed to a halt. Dust rose. Gus McKenna pawed toward the door.

"That stick must have got Clint and Hack, both! The dirty sons—let me out of here—let me at 'em!"

Dave caught McKenna's shoulder.

"Easy, Gus!" he cautioned. He shoved his gun into the center of his prisoner's back.

"All right, Sam!" he told the man ruthlessly. "You get out first. This is the end of the line!"

Rockwell held back, finally caved under the thrusting of Dave's gun, and tripped the latch of the door. Dave followed him out of the crazily slanted Concord. Half a dozen men came loping out of the timber, Casey Mason in the lead. When he saw his partner, Mason drew up sharply.

For a moment Mason stood in indecision. Crane followed the run of the man's thoughts. This was to have been the end of Lander and Levy. Sam Rockwell's presence in the coach altered that.

"Go easy, Casey!" Rockwell pleaded. "I've got a gun in my back!"

Mason heard this without a change of expression. Suddenly he grinned recklessly.

"It's your back, Sam!" he said. "You got into the hole you're in."

"Casey, listen!" Rockwell begged, "Hold the boys off. Crane'll drop me, sure!"

Mason smiled thinly.

"I'll give you a good burying, Sam. And I'll take good care of the line!"

The man's body shifted. He passed a signal to his men. A half-dozen guns jerked up. More weapons snapped in the brush. Crane flung himself away from Rockwell, unwilling to trigger into the man's back.

Mason was the first man to loose a shot from across the road and Sam Rockwell went down.

Lead whanged angrily against the stout oak of the crippled Concord's sides. With his gun bucking in his palm Crane worked back to the coach. Gus McKenna had sensed what was coming and opened the far door. Dave saw Sol Levy and Sue drop flat behind a low rock outcropping which gave them some shelter. Gus came around the boot of the stage, firing with icy calm.

Casey Mason went down, got up and ran a dozen yards. Gus snapped an angle shot at him and he rolled. Twenty yards down the road another gun opened out, flushing some of Mason's men from the brush. Within a few minutes the firing ceased abruptly. Six or

seven men stood, shaken, beside their dropped weapons. As many more were sprawled in the dust of the track. Gus doubled down the road, came loping back.

"Hack's got a busted leg, but Clint don't look too bad stove in, though he's out like a wet candle. The other stage's comin'. This won't go. They'll pass us!"

McKenna began to swear savagely and competently. Dave touched his arm. "Mason took our drivers off of their box. Take his off of the other stage. We'll put Clint and Hack aboard it. Won't hurt those Marysville passengers to walk on to the summit!"

Gus grew silent. Then he grinned. Sol and he went back after the two injured drivers. Crane dropped onto the hub of the stalled coach, where he could watch the remnants of the Rockwell and Mason crew.

This was the end—the knowledge brought strong relief. But something was lacking. Crane searched for it and found it. There could be no doubt now where Jim Birch would award his contract. Sue Lander's dream of a stage line across a nation, filling a need until iron wheels came, was a reality. These things were all settled, now. The fighting was done.

And he missed riding the box of the first stage over the summit. He missed the rush of wind and the rhythm of a good team and six thin ribbons in his hands. He missed the triumph of wheeling the winning Concord past Birch and the judges up ahead.

He had taken a part in the building of this last link. The thing he had thought was folly had come to life under his hand. And he wanted a slab of the glory. Why not? The greatest moment a reinsman could know—and he sat on the hub of a broken coach, discredited by many, distrusted by others, and with no stake in this final victory!

"Mister," a soft voice said diffidently, "could I ride to San Francisco with you. I've heard you're the best whip in California and I'd admire sitting up there."

The words were familiar. They were words he had heard outside Amos Crabb's terminal at San Jose. . . .

Long minute later, Sue drew back from him. "We've both had dreams, Dave, and we've both been fools. This is the end. I'm glad—and I'm grateful."

"For Birch—for the Overland?"

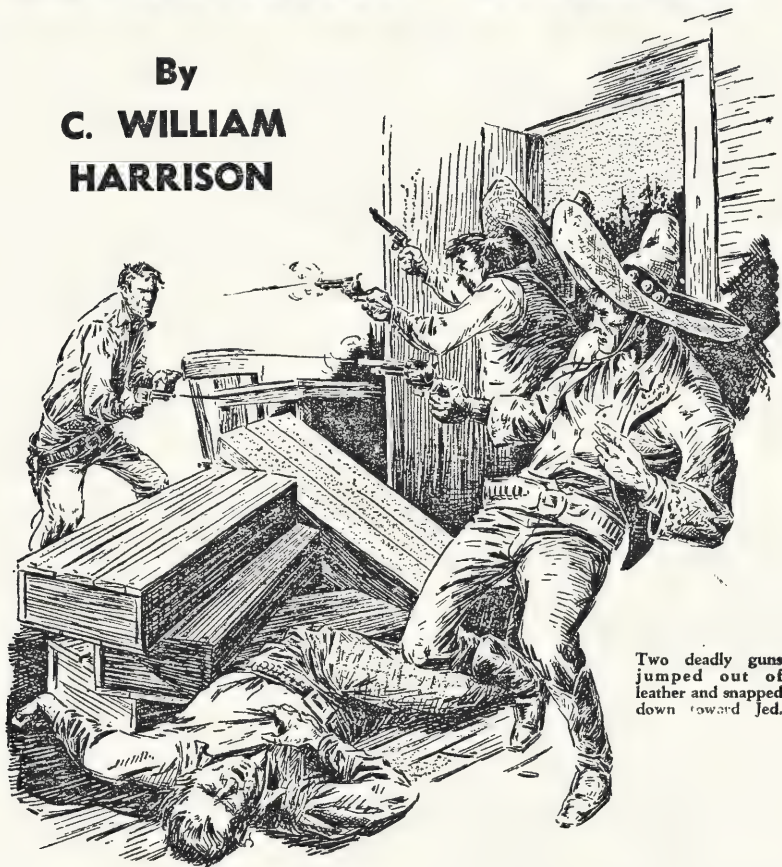
Sue shook her head.

"No, Dave—for me!"

Crane felt a fullness, then. He had missed nothing after all. The glory was for Jim Birch, a fitting tribute for the king of stage-men. For himself, there was this—and it was good. Even to a reinsman there is one thing more to be desired than a free-rolling Concord and a fistful of leather ribbons.

GUNSMOKE SCHOOL

By
**C. WILLIAM
HARRISON**



"You think you can take your choice, son, between a drunken renegade and a decent man, but I'm decidin' for you—with six-guns!"

JED PARKER made a habit of unstrapping his gunbelt and hanging it on a peg when he entered the little adobe school house. A heavily studded cartridge belt around his slim waist seemed out of place when he stood before his three dozen pupils teaching them the rules of fair play, honesty and courage. Though Jed could handle the heavy Colt with blinding speed, he always regretted the necessity of carrying it.

He seemed to be getting his ideas across, to at least thirty-five of his pupils. Billy Adams was the exception. The twelve-year-old boy

listened attentively, but with a constant, ill-suppressed sneer on his narrow, pinched dark face. Billy led the school in everything but deportment, and Jed blamed that on his hulking, drunken uncle, old 'Pache Adams.

'Pache had a bad reputation around the Arizona border town of Gunsight. His cronies were always tight-lipped, harsh-eyed men with the look of the gunhawk about them, or dark-skinned, shifty-eyed breeds from over the border. 'Pache liked rotgut and was too quick to slap leather. There was talk that he crossed the Mexican border on dark nights, that he met some of the roving bands of Apache raiders, trading rifles and bullets for gold. As yet no one had ever proved anything.

'Pache Adams was a bad hombre, and Jed Parker knew it as he rode out of Gunsight this Saturday morning. Billy had not been to school for the whole week and Jed intended to find out why.

Ten miles out of the town, Jed pulled up the grulla and looked down on the disordered yard of the Rafter A. He saw Billy go from the pole corral to the adobe house and Jed's wide lips set. His clear gray eyes grew somber and he shifted his long, supple length in the saddle. He lifted the reins and touched spurs to the horse.

In a few moments he rode into the yard, circling a rickety wagon, avoiding the pile of rusted tin cans near the door. He swung out of leather and turned, to find Billy impassively watching him from the door.

"You've missed school." Jed made it a statement of fact, not an accusation.

Billy nodded. His black hair strung down over his sharp, brown eyes. "I ain't had time to go," he said briefly. His glance lifted sharply as though in challenge. "Shucks, school's just a waste of time."

"Depends upon how you look at it," Jed answered in his slow Texan drawl. "Where's your uncle?"

"He ain't gonna see yuh," Billy stated flatly.

Jed stopped, looked down at the boy, eyes grave and thoughtful. Then he cuffed his hat brim back from his tanned face and his lips broke in a wide grin.

"I'm seeing him," he said. "It's time he had some good hard truth rammed down his teeth. A boy like you just can't run wild. He ought to know it."

The plank door suddenly slammed back. Jed had a glimpse of a stack of heavy boxes, then 'Pache Adams' hulking figure filled the frame. 'Pache glared at Jed, thick lips curled in contempt, narrowed eyes glittering. He passed a thick hand across the black stubble of his cleft chin. A gunbelt hung around his heavy waist and a dirty thumb hooked in it close to the six.

"You heard the brat," he snapped. He shoved Billy roughly out of the way. "I ain't wantin' to see you now or never. I reckon I can raise the younker any way I please. Hit leather and rattle your hocks out of here, before I get plumb riled."

Jed didn't move. Billy stood to one side, alert eyes darting from his uncle to his teacher. His face remained grave as though he waited for one of the two men to back down.

"I'm riding out," Jed said quietly, "but not before I've had my say. Billy will be a good man if he's allowed to develop. Up to now he hasn't had a chance. That's your fault, Adams. Do you want him to grow up into a drunken renegade, hanging around saloons and getting in trouble? Or do you want him to take his place in the world and be a man you can be proud of?"

'Pache's scowl deepened and he stepped clear of the door. His shifty eyes narrowed and his sagging face grew ugly. "Are you calling me them names?" he demanded.

"If the shoe fits," Jed shrugged, "wear it. I'm interested in keeping Billy in school. That's the main thing."

'Pache growled deep in his throat. He dropped into a crouch and his hand taloned out over his gun butt. It slapped down with a speedy draw and snapped up with a blurr. 'Pache had thought to catch Jed flat-footed.

The school teacher exploded into action. His supple body snapped to one side, slashed forward. 'Pache's six roared and the slug sped harmlessly by Jed's ear. Jed came in fast. He swept aside 'Pache's gun arm and his right fist cracked on the man's jaw. 'Pache slammed back against the 'dobe wall of the hut. His gun arched from his hand and struck the hard-pack earth.

He shook his head, roared in anger and came charging forward. Jed met him with lashing fists, hammering at his ribs and flabby stomach. 'Pache gave ground and Jed bored in. In desperation 'Pache swung a wild blow that connected solidly with Jed's chin.

Bright pinwheels spun in Jed's brain and he felt himself falling. He dimly heard Billy's excited shout. The world seemed to spin madly before his dazed eyes and he tried desperately to hold on to his senses. 'Pache's charging figure was only a dark blur and Jed's sick brain realized the big man intended to finish him off. He rolled, it seemed, with agonizing slowness.

'Pache's stamping boots thudded into the ground where Jed's body had been the moment before. His brain cleared a little. He grabbed 'Pache's ankle and heaved. The big man spilled backward, hitting the ground with a thud that shook him from head to heels.

Both men staggered upright at the same time. 'Pache, face runneled with sweat, came

lumbering forward, big arms spread wide to catch Jed in a crushing bear hug. Jed warily circled, knowing he had to avoid the big man's killing arms. His head cleared rapidly.

'Pache saw an opening and plunged in with the speed of a striking snake. One hand settled on Jed's arm, and the school teacher was jerked forward. He twisted and his shirt sleeve ripped in the taloned fingers. He spun clear, whirled, his fist jolting upward in a piston plunge that landed home. 'Pache Adams' eyes rolled back in his head and he dropped like a clubbed steer.

FOR a moment Jed stood over him, chest rising and falling as he gasped for air. His fists were still doubled, mouth set in a grim, straight line. 'Pache didn't move in the dust and Jed's fists slowly opened. He looked around, still a little dazed by the speed of events.

Billy stood to one side, his small fist holding the big six-gun that Jed had knocked from 'Pache's fingers. The tanned, pinched face showed no emotion. The dark eyes held steadily on Jed as though Billy sought to bore into Jed's mind and read his thoughts. Jed brushed the dust from his trousers and picked up his hat.

"Sorry it happened this way, Billy. I'd like to see you at school Monday."

The boy's glance shifted to the big, sprawled bulk of his uncle. He made no move to go to 'Pache and one corner of his thin mouth lifted slightly.

"Monday ain't here yet," he answered.

Jed turned away and walked to his horse. He swung into leather and looked down at Billy. He opened his lips to repeat the invitation, changed his mind. He lifted his arm in a gesture of farewell. The skin showed through the ripped fabric of the sleeve.

"Adios, Billy. It's up to you, I reckon."

He neck-reined the horse and rode slowly out of the cluttered yard. Once he looked back. Billy still sat hunkered a few yards from his fallen uncle. The boy seemed to be waiting patiently for 'Pache to regain his senses. The big six-gun hung limply from one of the small hands. Jed shrugged and straightened. He urged the horse into a fast trot.

He was in a dark mood by the time he reached Gunsight again. He had not wanted the fight with 'Pache Adams, but it had been forced upon him. Jed worried about the effects on Billy. He wanted the boy in school. The lad was quick and alert, and Jed had high hopes for him, if only the renegade uncle's influence could be overcome.

That made Jed curse himself. "You did a good job of bringing 'Pache around to your way of thinking!" he scornfully told himself. "That old outlaw will keep Billy away from

school for spite, come hell or high water."

He turned the horse into the livery stable and went morosely to his own home, a neat little adobe at the south end of town. He moodily cooked himself a spare supper, and ate little of it. He could still see Billy squatting in the cluttered yard, staring at the sprawled body of his uncle.

Jed worried about Billy Adams the whole week-end. Late Saturday night he saw 'Pache Adams and a border renegade named Pima Rosario ride in and go to the Cantina, a place that served fiery tequila and rotgut whiskey. Jed's gray eyes grew bleak and cold with disgust.

Monday morning he opened the school house and hung his gunbelt on the peg behind his desk as usual. He tried to evade his thoughts by writing arithmetic problems on the small blackboard, but he found himself listening for the first sound of the approaching children.

They gradually filed into the room. Each time the door opened, Jed's eyes lifted. Billy Adams had not yet come. Jed deliberately waited five minutes longer and then reluctantly called the class to order. He had definitely lost and he blamed himself for it. If he had kept his head—if he had not angered 'Pache—

The door opened. Billy Adams walked in. His face was still grave, void of emotions. His big dark eyes swept over Jed, then cut away. He walked to his bench and sat down, offering no explanation for his tardiness. Jed didn't mention it.

He tried to keep the quick elation from showing as he called the class to attention. He always started the morning by a brief five-minute talk on some aspect of citizenship. It was then that Billy Adams showed most clearly his disbelief.

Jed carefully watched Billy now as he spoke of the advantages of an education. The boy remained grave and impassive, his eyes sharp and weighing. However, his lips did not curl slightly in disdain as they always had in the past. Jed was careful not to preach. He spoke as though stating hard facts that could only point one way. He finished with a brief summary that tied the need of schooling with the hard life of these boys on the border ranches. Then he turned to the first assignments.

All day, Jed covertly watched Billy Adams. The boy seemed to apply himself more intently, seemed to work a little harder. Jed mentally kept his fingers crossed, elated and surprised that the boy had so much as bothered to return. At the noon recess, Jed had a chance to talk to him.

"Glad to see you, Billy. I hope you stay."

The boy shrugged. "Might. Might not. You'd better not ride too much near the Rafter

A. Unk is sure mad for that beating you gave him."

"How about you, Billy?" Jed asked.

"I ain't seen no one whip Unk before," Billy said flatly and walked off. It was some minutes before Jed realized the boy had not disclosed his own feelings over the fight and by then it was too late to reopen the discussion again.

For almost a month, Billy Adams came regularly to school. He applied himself and Jed felt a keen sense of satisfaction at the consistently high grades the boy earned. They justified all of Jed's belief in him. During this time Jed saw very little of 'Pache Adams and his cronies. But whispers had started in Gunsight, stories that the Indian raiders to the north were receiving weapons, stories of laden mule trains heading south across the border to secret meetings with Yaquis. The sheriff of Gunsight watched the Adams ranch, but so far nothing out of the way had occurred.

THEN Billy was absent from school. Jed curbed an impulse to ride out to the Rafter A the first night. He did not want another fight with 'Pache for fear it would definitely antagonize Billy. Jed waited impatiently for the next morning. Billy did not come to school.

His absence continued for three days. Jed made discreet inquiries and discovered that the rest of the boys had not seen Billy, nor had he been seen around Gunsight. Jed waited impatiently, trying to tell himself that Billy had tired for the time being of school, that he would come back.

At the end of the third day, Jed angrily decided that 'Pache Adams was behind Billy's absence. The boy had not been seen anywhere and there were several places where a lad could loaf on an illegal holiday from school—the livery barn, the stage station, the blacksmith shop or the cattle pens down by the spur railroad line. Or someone would see him around the ranch. Since Billy had been in none of these places, Jed came to the conclusion that 'Pache probably held the boy in the ranch house to see what the school teacher would do about it.

The more he thought of this angle, the angrier Jed became. He tried to argue himself out of it, and succeeded fairly well until after he had finished the evening meal. Then he at last surrendered to the idea. He stood for long minutes looking out on the dusty street of Gunsight, his thoughts as dark as the long purple shadows that crept in from the sear, desert hills.

With a muttered oath, he turned from the window and picked up his gunbelt. He strapped it on, grabbed his hat and strode from the house. In less than ten minutes he

cantered out of Gunsight, headed for the Rafter A. He rode at a fast clip until he was once more looking down on the ill-omened spread. He pulled up the horse.

A full moon peered over the eastern mountains, flooding the valley with silver. Jed could distinctly see each building of the spread below, make out the broken wagon in the yard, the pile of cans. Horses stamped in the corral and he caught a quick flicker of light from the ranch house. Jed became uncertain, then anger got the best of him.

He loosened the six-gun in the holster, remembering Billy's warning. He rode down the slope and up to the ranch yard with no attempt to conceal his movements. Just as he reached the sagging gate, the light in the house blanked out. Jed stepped out of the saddle and walked toward the door.

There was no sound, no movement. He knocked on the rough planks and waited impatiently. No one answered. He knocked again, a louder, rapid tattoo of his knuckles on the wood.

"I know you're there, 'Pache," he called. "Open up. I want to talk to you."

He caught a flick of movement behind him and whirled. He had time for a single swift glimpse of dark figures that rushed him from every side, silent and deadly. His hand slapped down to his gun, but the men were on him, spilling over him like a wave. He struck out blindly as he was thrust back against the door. A man cursed. Then something hard and solid slammed down on Jed's head. Lights burst in his brain and then he felt himself plummeting down into darkness. . . .

His eyes blinked painfully open. He lay on the hard-packed floor in a dirty room. A light burned low on a rough table piled high with unwashed plates and cups. Billy Adams sat on a chair, wide dark eyes curiously watching Jed. He tried to pull himself up and couldn't.

"Unk tied you up, him and Pima," Billy said quietly in a low tone. "You sure stuck your head in a passel of trouble this time."

Jed fought off the dizzy sickness. He could hear men working in the next room beyond the closed door. It sounded as though they moved heavy objects. Somewhere outside a horse snorted. Jed lay still, gray eyes questioning the boy. Billy looked away, and stared moodily across the room at the far wall.

"I came to see if you'd come back to school."

"You sure walked into trouble," Billy answered, still in the same low tone. "Unk kept me here to help him and Pima. There's a big shipment of rifles going to the Yaquis. That's what they're moving out there now."

Jed's eyes widened. "Aren't you afraid to tell me this?"

"Why? Unk and Pima are taking you across the border. I don't reckon you'll be coming back."

Silence fell on the little room. Beyond the walls someone swore loudly and 'Pache's coarse voiced raised in quick orders. Jed listened to them, turned his attention to Billy. The boy still stared at the far wall. Jed sighed.

"Well, I guess that throws a tight loop over everything."

Billy looked around. "Ain't you scared?"

Jed thought it over. "A little bit, I guess, but not enough to crawl to any of those hombres outside. I'm disappointed, though. I'd hoped to see you make something of yourself."

Billy arose slowly from the chair. He looked puzzled, torn by inner conflicts. He turned his head and watched the closed door for long minutes, then threw Jed another searching glance. He went to the door, opened it. Jed had a glimpse of long wooden boxes before the door closed behind Billy.

Jed tested the ropes. Whoever had done the tying was an expert at knots. There was no give to them. He stopped tugging at the unyielding strands. The door opened and Billy slipped in again.

The boy made sure the door was closed. He turned and his dark eyes seemed to glitter in the lamp light. His thin mouth quivered a bit and then he had control of it. He pulled a six-gun from his shirt and placed it on the table. One grubby hand pulled a snap-blade jackknife from his trouser pocket. He knelt beside Jed.

"I'm giving you a chance. Unk is mighty mean and I don't take to some of his ways—like what he plans to do with you. Give me time to get out of the room, then I reckon the rest is up to you."

Jed nodded. "How many out there?"

"Four. It ain't much of a chance, but it's all I can do."

He slashed the ropes around Jed's wrists and slipped to the table. He blew out the lamp, then the door opened and closed. Jed sat up, rubbing circulation back into his fingers. Then he tackled the knots that bound his ankles. In another moment he stood up and groped through the darkness to the table. His fingers touched the cool, reassuring metal of the six. He broke the six, checked the load. Satisfied, he went to the door.

HE LISTENED. The work in the next room still continued. Jed tensed, flung open the door and jumped through. A breed looked up in stunned surprise, dropping his end of a heavy gun case. 'Pache whirled and Pima Rosario swore in astonishment.

Jed's gun centered on 'Pache, but his alert

eyes flicked to the rest. "Reach. Face the wall over there until I pull your fangs. The sheriff is going to be mighty glad to see you."

The breeds and Pima slowly turned. 'Pache's face choked red with anger and then his arms reluctantly lifted. He made a move to face the wall. Suddenly he wheeled and faded to one side. Pima Rosario caught the movement and exploded into action himself. Two deadly guns snapped down toward Jed.

Jed dropped hammer, counting Pima as the most dangerous of the group. Gun roar filled the small room, and blue smoke added to the confusion of fast-shifting bodies. Jed saw Pima's gun blossom flame in the same instant his own slug smashed into the breed's throat.

'Pache came into the game from near the door. A fist of steel smashed Jed's shoulder, sent him spinning half around. He fired at the bulky figure and 'Pache let out a squawl like a frightened cat. Jed triggered again and 'Pache went stumbling out the door.

Jed hit the floor, rolled, fighting the intense pain in his shoulder. The remaining breeds jumped toward the narrow door as Jed's six flashed up. His bullet cracked plaster from the door frame and sped the men on their way. He heard the quick thrum of hoofs that faded swiftly in the night toward Mexico.

His left shoulder felt paralyzed and his shirt was stained with blood. Jed sat up, clenching his lips against the pain. Pima Rosario sprawled silent in death on the dirt floor. A shadow moved outside.

"It's just me," Billy said thickly. He stepped inside, saw Pima, the blood on Jed's shirt. "I reckon you're all the man I thought you was," he said in an awed voice.

Jed dropped the gun and gripped his shoulder.

"Why did you give me the six?" Jed asked abruptly.

Billy shrugged. "Unk ain't never been good to me. You talked nice and for all your book stuff, you looked like a real hombre. I wanted to find out."

Despite the pain, Jed grinned. Then he sobered. "Billy, what is your Uncle going to do to you for this?"

"Unk ain't coming out of Mexico no more," Billy said wisely. "These rifles will make the sheriff plumb riled. I reckon I can take care of myself if Unk leaves me alone."

"Not on your life!" Jed snapped. He painfully climbed to his feet. "Help me to the sheriff and the sawbones and then you start living in your new home—my place."

Billy's eyes gleamed and, for the first time Jed could remember, the boy smiled. It lit up his whole pinched face, revealed a boy that Jed had never seen before.

"Reckon I'll like that," he stated simply. "Let's get going."

By
LANCE KERMIT



CHAPTER ONE

Green Gold

IT WAS the way bad luck had knocked him around these past months that had built this core of toughness in Ruck Hendry. It had taken the old easy pleasantry out of him and placed in its stead the on-edge truculence of a fighting man who knew his back was to the wall, but who wouldn't give up.

There had been scant reason for the fight he'd had in Livingstone, but his temper flaring

like a wind-whipped flame when the man had carelessly bumped him on the street, he'd battered the puncher down. He had been lucky to escape the town's jail. If that had happened up ahead in Oreville, it would have blown his only chance to sell his herd.

His nerves were shot from months of overwork, and he was nagged by an inexplicable fear that his last hope for raising money in Oreville would fall through.

The winter had done its worst to Ruck Hendry. The first storm had swooped down from the Big Horns in early November, and

MURDER MINE

A cowman sought his last chance with a starveling herd in Oreville—and found a grave lined with green gold.



The killer's run changed to a loose shamle, he tripped, began to fall. . .

blizzard had followed blizzard for three frozen months.

Sheltered from northern winds as was his Catpaw ranch in Flagg Basin, Ruck had been as hard hit as his neighbors. Even harder hit. His had been the lone fight of a new rancher who couldn't afford hired help or the price of fodder for his cattle. His fall crop of hay was gone by January, leaving only the scraggy patches of snow-buried grass and the cottonwood branches he cut for food.

It had been a heartbreaking fight, endless days in the raw cold, bucking snowdrifts and ice crusts to keep his dwindling herd together. Starvation had filed his cattle into gaunt skeletons of what they had been, and only an unexpected break in the weather had checked the complete destruction of his herd. But those long weeks of worry and strain had stamped their indelible marks on Ruck's mind and body.

The day was hot as Ruck Hendry rode into Oreville. Behind him lay the long trail of his drive with his hundred head of cattle, snaking through the mountains and curving past the hot springs and steaming geysers of Yellowstone. Now the cattle were bedded down five miles outside town, and he was moving into Oreville on his jaded roan.

He reined in beside a miner angling across the wheel-gutted street. "Where's the office of the Copper Queen?" There was a harshness in his tone that he couldn't entirely soften.

The miner swung around with a dark flush of resentment. "Mister, you've got a nasty way of askin' for a favor," he remarked.

TEMPER began climbing through Ruck's raw nerves. The miner rocked back on his heels, looked up at Ruck stonily. "You cowmen think you're the only white men on earth, but damn if you can use that

tone on me," he answered levelly. "You can do your askin' from someone else!"

The miner swung away stiffly, and it was then that Ruck's temper broke. He couldn't stop it. One minute he was gripping himself hard; the next all the on-edge fury in him was flaring free.

He kicked his roan forward in a long jump that brought him alongside the miner. He reached down a long arm, jerked the man around savagely.

"Mister, I asked you a question!"

Wrath spilled darkly through the miner's rough face. "Why, you— Then he saw the wildness in Ruck's eyes, and gray took all the color out of his face. "No offense, stranger," he spoke out quickly. "I just—the Copper Queen's over there, at the head of Gulch Street, what's left of it."

An adverse presentiment tightened Ruck's hard mouth. There was that nameless fear nagging him again. "Anything wrong with the Queen?"

"Everything's wrong," the miner said hoarsely. Then fear got the best of him. He broke away and shouldered hurriedly into the crowd.

For a moment Ruck was motionless in his saddle, regretting that wild flare of his temper. He hadn't realized how close he had come to being crazed by those snow-bound months. Once he had seen a puncher come off the range after a long winter in solitude, run amuck in a town until he was shot down by a deputy marshal. And Ruck thought with a quick stab of fear, *I've got to watch myself!*

The street was clogged with the traffic of miners and townsmen and heavily loaded freight wagons and, as he moved through the throng, a rising worry haunted Hendry's nerves. If anything were wrong at the Copper Queen, if the sale of his beef fell through his ranch would go under before the year ended.

He found Gulch Street and slanted his horse up the rutty way. The street was narrow, built up the gulch that climbed the slope of the butte. Rising higher, Ruck had his full view of the town.

It wasn't a pretty thing to look at. Haste of the miners to get at the riches in buried ore had thrown the town together in a confused jumble of buildings and twisting streets. Waste heaps of slag made ugly scars here and there, and the sulphurous fumes from the high stacks of the smelters had killed all vegetation. Latticed gallows thrust their raw patterns against the sky and the sun, setting red behind the murk of smelter smoke, glinted ruddily from the iron roofs of miners' shacks perched on the flanks of the butte.

Ruck Hendry dismounted in front of the frame building that worried the Copper Queen.

Some distance to one side, he could see the mine, roofed by a plank structure that housed the donkey engine which lowered and raised the cage through the shaft. But all activity seemed at a stand-still, and worry etched deeper into Hendry's brain.

The office door opened, and Ruck turned. The man who came out was as tall as Ruck Hendry, but heavier and with a strong man's angular lines. His face was flat-planed, and the hint of grim, heady intolerance was only faintly veiled by his half smile. This man, Ruck labeled automatically, was one who bowed only to his own will, and could be all the more dangerous because of this heady streak.

"Have you got any business here?" the man asked.

Ruck Hendry smiled against the troubled run of his thoughts. He stated his name, and said, "I drove a hundred head of cows here from my ranch down in Wyoming to sell to the Copper Queen for beef. I've got a letter from N. B. Scott, ordering them."

The man shook his head. "You've wasted a lot of time and work, Hendry. The last thing we need is your beef."

Ruck's smile faded. Now the doubts that had undermined his hopes changed to something real and bitter.

"But this letter I got from Scott—"

The man's voice turned coldly arbitrary. "I've no time to waste arguing with you. I'm Noyles—Dane Noyles, and I'm half-owner of this mine. When I say we can't use your beef, I mean it!"

TWO other men drifted out of the mine office, and halted beside Noyles. Ruck Hendry tagged them with a single sharp glance. They were danger in any man's language, loose-coupled and coldly dispassionate, with hands that never strayed far from holstered guns.

Ruck shifted his glance back to Dane Noyles. He tried to keep the bitter thrust of his anger in check.

"If it's just the same with you, I'd like to talk with N. B. Scott."

"Scott is dead!" was Noyles' short answer.

Ruck Hendry considered that, feeling his last thread of hope snap. Then anger got into him, riding hot along his nerves.

He said, tightly, "When Scott sent his order to me, he was acting for the mine. Even if he is dead, his letter is as good as a contract, and the Copper Queen is liable. I went through hell last winter trying to keep my ranch together. Selling the beef I drove here is my only hope, and I'm holding your mine to that contract."

Dane Noyles' brows raised in faint derision.

"Yeah?" Then he motioned to the two men beside him, and his tone turned implacable. "Meet Sid Warner and Link Caven, Hendry. I hired these men to take care of trouble for me, Hendry. Ask for it, and you'll get it. Now clear out!"

Ruck Hendry didn't move. His mouth hardened and stubborn temper narrowed his eyes. "You're only half of this company, Noyles. I'm stayin' until I see the other half."

Sid Warner and Link Caven moved forward together. Menace was in Warner's soft drawl. "He said clear out—"

Caven put a hand on Hendry's chest and shoved. Ruck slapped the hand away, and held his ground.

Something close to cruel eagerness came into Link Caven's faded eyes. "So it's trouble you want, is it?" he said. Then he threw his fist.

It came as suddenly as that, a mirthless drawl and then a smashing fist. Ruck Hendry rocked his head to one side, but he only partially avoided the blow. Hard knuckles scraped like raw fire along the shelf of his jaw, and then he was driving in. His attack, unexpected against such odds, caught the men by surprise. He caught the front of Link Caven's shirt, jerked him into a single, sledging blow.

He heard the hoarse blow of air from Caven's lungs and, from the corner of his eye, saw Sid Warner's hand slashing gunward. Hendry tightened his grip on Caven's shirt, spun and sent the man's sagging body crashing into Warner. Both men went down, and only Warner got up. But Hendry was ready, and it was almost cruel the way he did it.

He shoved Warner off balance as the other tried again for his gun. He tipped Warner's narrow jaw back with an up-curving left, then stepped forward with a right that carried all the power of his wide shoulders.

Hendry didn't wait to see the man fall. He started to spin, and that was when Dane Noyles' gun gouged into the small of his back.

"Hendry, you act like you *want* to be killed!" Noyles said harshly. "Damn you, clear out of here before I blow you to pieces!"

THE girl came while the muzzle of Dane Noyles' gun was biting into the small of Ruck Hendry's back. At first Ruck thought it was a boy whipping the buckboard's team up the narrow street, and it was a natural mistake. In jeans and blue cotton shirt she looked like a boy, her hair pinned back by a battered felt hat. And Hendry's glance only scraped her as he started his turn against Noyles' leveled gun. He heard the smothered rasp of Noyles' oath, the metallic click of the Colt hammer coming to full cock.

Then a girl's sharp cry from the buckboard:

"Dane—don't do it!"

The gun relaxed its deadly pressure. He dropped back a pace as he turned to face Dane Noyles, and his hand was near his own holstered weapon. A bleak invitation was in the mine superintendent's stare.

The buckboard screeched to a halt, and again Ruck Hendry heard the girl's sharp voice.

"Dane, what's the trouble here?"

Temper was in the thin pressure of Dane Noyles' mouth. "This man came here to make trouble, and he's going to get it."

Hendry felt the quick heat of the girl's stare. She said, "Get out of here, whoever you are!"

Ruck slanted bitter mockery at the girl. "Lady, you don't think I shove around that easy, do you?"

Link Caven rolled over on the ground, and came to his feet. One hand was pressed against Caven's middle, where Ruck's fist had landed, and the other was played out over a holstered gun. Death was in his washed-out eyes.

Ruck said softly, "I wouldn't fiddle around that gun too much, mister," and saw rage cloud Caven's look.

One thing was clear to Ruck Hendry: Link Caven and Sid Warner took their orders from Dane Noyles. Where the girl stood in this, Hendry could not guess. But it was plain her coming had forced Noyles to check the violence that had threatened to blast from his leveled gun.

The stubborn streak in Hendry flattened his tone. "Let's get a few things straight right off," he said coldly. "I didn't come here to make trouble, but I can handle any you throw at me. All I want is a fair shake, and I mean to have it. N. B. Scott contracted to buy a hundred head of beef from me, and I won't stand for a runaround."

Noyles' glance flicked toward the girl. "I told him N. B. was—"

Surprise was in the girl's quick words. "Are you Mr. Ruck Hendry, from Tensleep, Wyoming?" She hardly waited for Ruck's nod. "I'm the one who sent you that letter."

Some of the stiffness left Ruck's mouth. Dane Noyles lowered his gun, and an enigmatic smile eased the tight pinch of temper from his face.

"You might let me know about the contracts you let out," he said dryly.

"Dane, I told you about it!"

"You just think you did." Noyles' smile broadened into a grim. "With all the trouble she's had, she's got a right to make a few slips," he said to Hendry. "Sorry I got rough."

Ruck said, "Forget it."

But there was hatred in Sid Warner's dark

eyes as he pushed slowly to his feet. For a moment Warner stood there beside Link Caven, staring at Caven in silent venom, then both men wheeled suddenly and stalked away.

Dane Noyles laughed shortly. "They're sore, but they'll get over it." Then he said to Nora Scott. "I guess it's up to you to tell Hendry how you're going to pay for his beef."

When the mine superintendent was gone, Ruck waited for the girl to speak. Fine lines of worry were etched around her eyes and mouth, and she didn't seem to know how or where to start.

Ruck rolled himself a smoke, then lifted his glance to the girl. He said slowly, "Last winter was tough on ranchers. Most of us lost half the cattle we owned, and I'll lose my ranch if I don't get cash for the beef I drove up here."

She made a nervous motion with her hand. "I haven't got the money."

It was no surprise to Ruck Hendry. By all he had noticed, he knew the Copper Queen had not been in operation for weeks.

He said, harshly, "Then why did you trick me into driving up here?"

"I didn't trick you. That is—"

"You signed your father's name to that letter."

She shook her head defensively. "N. B. are my initials, too." Then she said bitterly, "Getting beef for my men is my only chance of keeping the Queen going."

"Getting cash is my only hope of holding my ranch," Ruck said roughly. "Why use your tricks on me? I've got troubles of my own, and I'm stuck now. I can't sell my cattle now; it's too late. There's not another buyer in the country who hasn't already contracted for his beef. Lady, you ought to be proud of yourself!"

He ground his cigaret into the dust angrily, started to spin away. She caught his arm, pulled him back. He faced her squarely, his mouth white-edged and hard.

"Give me a chance to explain," she begged.

He waited grimly.

"The Copper Queen is a good mine, but dad didn't have the money for development," she said. "He sold Dane Noyles half interest so he could buy the machinery he needed. Trouble followed us as soon as we hit ore. A fire broke out on the four hundred foot level, and we had to blast the tunnel to put it out. Just after we got the tunnel open again, dad was killed when he fell down the shaft. I offered to sell out to Noyles, but he didn't have the money. We couldn't pay the men, so they quit working."

Hendry waited in bitter silence. She'd had it tough, but no matter how sorry he felt for her, he still had his own worries. And the

knowledge that she had caused him to make a futile two-hundred-mile trail drive pushed its hot head of anger through him.

"I can put the Queen back in operation if you'll let me have your cattle," Nora Scott said.

"That would be generous of me, wouldn't it?" he said acidly. "Lady, you've got the wrong idea. A man don't raise cows for the fun of it. He expects to turn an honest dollar once in a while for his work."

She flushed under the sting of his words. She gave him her plea in a quick, anxious voice.

"I'm not asking you to give them to me! All the mines around here are on short shifts now. I've got men who'll work for me without pay if I'll guarantee them food for their families, until I can pay them wages. It's a gamble for you, but I'll pay you an extra two dollars a head if you'll let me have your cattle now."

Ruck stared at the girl narrowly. "Let me get this straight," he said grimly. "You want me to let you have my cattle on credit. You'll use my beef to feed your miners until you've got your mine paying again. Is that your proposition?"

She nodded silently.

"What if you have more trouble that'll keep the Queen from paying off?"

She didn't answer that.

"It's the risk I'll have to take, is that it?" he grunted drily. "Lady, you've got a way of stacking the cards against a man that no gambler ever learned! All right, it's a deal, but I've got a string tied to it! From now on in, I'm hangin' around to see that nothin' else happens to the Copper Queen and costs me my beef."

CHAPTER TWO

Death Rides By Night

AFTER all, there was nothing else he could have done. Ruck Hendry thought of that as he finished his evening meal over the dying embers of his campfire. In spite of the means Nora Scott had used to bring him here with his cattle, she offered him his only hope for a sale. He could have driven his beef back down the trail to his ranch, but cattle were worthless without a buyer, and the financial foundation of the entire Territory had been rocked by the havoc of the past winter. Business was at a standstill, and Ruck had a mortgage note coming due shortly, and he had the next winter to think of. Nora Scott had offered him a straw, and he had clutched it as his only hope.

Sundown was followed by a quick fall of darkness, and the natural caution of a rider in

strange country prompted Ruck to stomp out the coals of his fire. That done, he pulled up the collar of his jumper against the growing chill of night. His horse, saddled and ready for any emergency, was nearby, and it was reassuring to hear the peaceful sounds of his cattle bedded down a hundred yards to the north.

Still an intangible presentiment of coming trouble thinned Ruck's nerves. It was like being in the same room with danger without being able to see it or hear it. He didn't like it, the way that nameless warning kept unraveling out of the core of his mind.

He stood up, looking and listening. But the night was dark, and the only sounds he could pick up were ordinary ones for the hour. Somewhere far off a timber wolf wailed; nearer he heard the dry rattle of elk horns against the limbs of a pine.

One worry kept hugging his mind. If anyone was out to ruin the Copper Queen, it was certain they would try to prevent Ruck Hendry's cattle from putting the mine back into operation. Who or what was behind the Queen's trouble, Ruck could not guess. Perhaps some powerful and grasping rival syndicate; Nora Scott had suggested that.

Dane Noyles? Ruck considered the man grimly. Noyles was tough and Ruck suspected a shrewd, calculating streak in the man. But Nora had vouched for Noyles' honesty, and for the guns Noyles had hired—Link Caven and Sid Warner—in an attempt to save the mine.

Yet this was a country that had known every form of violence and treachery. Virginia City, Alder Gulch, and those other mining towns not far to the south had started it, turned red by the guns of Cy Skinner, Jack Cleveland and others of Henry Plummer's murder pack. Plummer had posed as a lawman, but he had died a murderer. Maybe the man behind the Copper Queen's troubles was working the same way, playing out his plans from the inside.

One of the herd got to its feet, and that seemed a signal for others to get up from the ground. This sign of the cattle's nervousness was a warning in itself for Ruck Hendry. He turned to his horse. The horse's ears were up; taut muscles quivered along its flanks.

"Mountain lion," Ruck muttered. "Or maybe a bear."

He listened, but he could hear nothing save the nervous blowing of the cattle. They seemed to be drifting off toward the north, as though shying away from some hidden danger.

Ruck swung into the saddle, started his mount toward the cattle at a walk. He quartered the meadow, riding back and forth as he drew nearer the drifting herd. He neither saw nor heard sign of a marauding animal. Still the cattle drifted on, more rapidly now, nerves up and wary.

Ruck began singing a low placating range tune, but that failed to quiet the cattle. He cut around them, riding slowly and carefully, knowing that any sudden sound or move might throw the herd into a stampede. He pinched in on the leaders, still singing softly, trying to start them milling back to their bedding grounds. It was a futile effort, like attempting to turn back the current of a river. Whatever had disturbed them was in the air, a scent that was blowing to them from the south.

BUCK circled back, combing the meadow again, working toward the wall of trees to the south. Now he knew by the nervous shivering of muscles along the flank of his horse that he was on the right track. He had to force the animal on.

Then he saw something, like a faint shadow moving at the edge of the meadow. He pulled his gun, his thumb curling tensely over the hammer.

He called out.

The thing didn't bolt and flee at the sound of his voice. Ruck's horse whickered his

TEST SIGHT TASTE RIGHT

If the ladder is placed against building, how far up will it reach?



fright, but he forced the animal on. Whatever the vague shape was, it seemed to be moving back and forth, like a pendulum swinging beneath the out-thrust limb of a pine.

The horse shied away, but Ruck pulled the animal back, crowding closer. Then he was near enough to identify the swinging shape. Someone had killed a mountain lion, had strung up the carcass beneath the tree limb, so its scent would blow down on the cattle. Someone was trying for a stampede!

Ruck swung his mount back toward the herd, riding at a hard run. He heard a man's voice in the darkness ahead call out harshly.

"Hurry, blast it!"

Ruck yelled, "Hey, damn you!"

Now he could make out the vague black shape of the herd ahead beginning to run. And he saw the indistinct movement of a man a few yards off the right flank of the herd. Ruck slanted his horse grimly in that direction, riding desperately, but he didn't have a chance.

He saw a match flare, and he would have used his gun except for one last hope of avoiding a stampede. The match flickered down, touched the ground, and there was a swift flare of blue-white flame. Against the light, Ruck saw a man leaping back toward the darkness.

Ruck used his gun, then. He couldn't recognize the man, but he knew all he needed to know—at the roar of Ruck's gun, the prowler yelled and leaped to one side as though he had stepped on a hot iron. Then he was out of sight, into the side-wall of trees that flanked the meadow.

It was what had happened at the drop of the man's match that had started the stampede. That first flare of blue-white flame changed to a line of fire racing across the meadow behind the herd, throwing the cattle into a mad, witless run.

Ruck changed the direction of his horse. He hurtled the line of flame, and smelled the acrid tang of burnt powder. Whoever those night riders were, they had spilled a path of black powder across the meadow, then used the scent of the dead mountain lion to frighten the cattle into position for the stampede.

Ahead, the cattle were breaking through the night in a mad, witless run, hoofs thundering, horns clashing against horns. Ruck pounded after them, riding high in his saddle, his mind already throwing together a desperate plan to stop the stampede. It was the cliff a mile ahead, the river that brawled at the foot of its sheer hundred foot drop, that cramped him for time. If he didn't turn the stampede inside that mile, his herd would be destroyed.

He caught up with the tail of the stampede, began creeping up toward the leaders. The

speed of his horse seemed futilely slow. He fought his mount on, feeling the snap and roll of muscles under his legs. He caught the leaders when he was less than half a mile from the precipice. He crowded in on them, yelling and cursing, but he couldn't change their wild course.

He kicked savagely at the nearest of the leaders, but the animal gave ground only slightly. Not enough. Now he thought he could see the lip of the river's gash a quarter mile ahead in the moon-lighted darkness, and that drove savage desperation through him.

He jabbed his gun toward the nearest cow, and pulled the trigger. He fired again, a third time, and saw each animal stumble and go down. The cattle sheered off at a sharper angle, and twice more he used his gun. Now the stampede was shunting toward the east, and the lay of the land in that direction was unfamiliar to Ruck. If the river curved in from the east—he tried to shut that thought from his mind.

Abruptly the land began to slant down, and Ruck had a quick glimpse of the river close ahead. He sheered his horse away from the cattle and reined in sharply at the water's edge. It was the river that halted the stampede, piling them up in the icy current. Ruck rode around them, cursing out his relief, as he forced them across the stream.

"You didn't miss that cliff a hundred yards," he said savagely. "All right, you blankety-blanks, you started this, and now you can keep goin'. I'll see the Copper Queen take delivery on you by mornin'."

DAWN broke, chill and gray. Across town a smelter's whistle blew, wakening harsh echoes through the hills; the high stacks were beginning to spill out black plumes of smoke and poisonous sulphur fumes. The town was already a beehive of activity, multiple-teamed freight wagons trudging along the streets, buyers and sellers and speculators mingling on the crowded plank walks.

"Here come the men," Nora Scott said.

Ruck Hendry shifted his glance to the narrow road that climbed the slope of the butte to the Copper Queen. They were a grizzled denim-clad crew, older than Ruck had expected. He remarked on this to the girl beside him.

"That's why I was able to get them," she said. "Other mines won't hire them because of their age, and their families have to eat. They agreed to work for their food until I can pay them."

"They can't put out enough work to pay for the grub they'll eat," Dane Noyles said dryly.

Ruck gave Noyles a level glance. "It's my beef they'll be getting," he said grimly.

The miners halted near the shaft house of the Copper Queen. They needed work, and they looked it, but they showed no eagerness to get started. They were men who had been forced by necessity to do something they feared and dreaded.

Nora Scott motioned to one of them. "I'd like you to be shift foreman, Mr. O'Bannon."

Mack O'Bannon was a big man, round-shouldered and gray. He shrugged uncertainly.

"Well, I don't know, ma'am—"

Worry crept into Nora's tone. "You're not going to back out on me, are you?"

O'Bannon scraped his shoes restlessly in the dust. "We don't want to, ma'am." His

glance flicked to the men beside him. He was their appointed spokesman, but he didn't know how to put his words. "We've been thinkin' things over after you got us together yesterday. We've seen mines like the Queen before. You've had trouble here ever since your dad opened up, and when bad luck starts it don't stop. We'd be fools to work here."

"That's nothing but superstition!" And Nora Scott added desperately. "I'm offering

He kicked his roan forward, jerked the man around savagely. . . .



you food now, and back pay with bonus as soon as we get ore to the smelter. Your families need that!"

"We can't help our women and kids if we're dead," O'Bannon said darkly. "We're sorry, Miss Nora, but we just can't take the job."

At one side, Sid Warner grunted. Link Caven rolled and lit a cigaret, his face expressionless. Dane Noyles moved his hand

in an impatient, defeated gesture and shrugged.

"Then that's that!" he muttered. "Anyhow, I can't say I blame them."

The miners started to turn away, and Ruck Hendry said, "Wait!"

The miners turned back, and now that he had held them, Ruck did not know how to go on. He watched them through a moment of silence, seeing the bitter creases in their faces and the fading hopes of men being made useless by age.

When he spoke, Ruck's voice was harsh, almost ruthless. "The best years are behind every one of you. The other mines won't hire you because you're too old, but Nora Scott is at least offering you a chance."

"A chance to be killed," a man said drily.

"And a chance to get on a payroll again!" Ruck Hendry shot back. "What good are you alive to your families if you can't feed and clothe them? You're just deadwood, taking the food out of their mouths!"

HE HIT them hard. He hurt them, knocking them with the truth.

"Don't let a few years make cowards out of you! This is your chance, men! Help this girl now, and she'll never let you down."

One of the men, a labor-stooped oldster, said bitterly. "My name's Paddy Wallin, mister, and I've mined since I was old enough to lift a shovel. You're not a miner, and you don't know what you're askin' us to do."

"Maybe not," Ruck Hendry rapped back. "But I know this much: you're afraid to take this job because you think the Queen is jinxed."

"Well, ain't it?" Wallin growled.

Hendry countered that with a question of his own. "If a man took a swing at you, would you turn and run?"

"I'm not afraid of any man livin'," Paddy Wallin snapped, "and that goes for all of us."

"Then if you run from this job now," Ruck pressed him, "you'll be running from a man who's trying to kill the Copper Queen!"

Silence dropped over the mine shaft house, and Ruck broke it with grim, flat words.

"I can't prove any man was behind what happened to the mine before I came here. But last night a couple snakes in man's britches tried to drive my cattle over a cliff to keep you men from hirin' on here. That's proof enough of what's behind the Queen's jinx. I'm not askin' you men to take any chance I won't take. I'll go into the mine with you, and I'll be wearin' a gun."

It was hard talk, and it hit home. A tight grin stretched Mack O'Bannon's mouth.

"That's good enough for me, Hendry!"

The miners moved to the shaft cage, and Nora Scott pressed her hand on Ruck's arm.

"Thanks," she said softly.

Hendry paused near the cage, his glance on Sid Warner and Link Caven. "Where were you boys about eleven o'clock last night?"

Temper clouded Sid Warner's stare, and his hand tensed near his gun. "Don't try to pin that stampede on us!" he rasped.

"You've got more gall than brains," Link Caven sneered.

Dane Noyles said with an edge of resentment, "They were playing cards in my room, Hendry. I'll vouch for that."

Ruck's words were soft, bleak. "And who'll vouch for you?"

Anger darkened Noyles' craggy face, then changed to derisive amusement. "So you think I may be behind this trouble! All right, Hendry, I can change that quick enough. I'll go into the mine with you."

It was an uncanny experience for Ruck Hendry, like being lowered alive into a grave that had no bottom. Daylight faded swiftly as the iron cage was lowered down the shaft, until only the candle lanterns held back the utter darkness.

AT THE four-hundred-foot level, Noyles signaled to the man on the donkey engine above, and the cage halted. They stepped into the mouth of the tunnel. Here the air was dank and chill, and the tunnel's floor was wet and slick under Hendry's feet.

He looked at the heavy timbers that braced the walls and the roof, wondered if they were strong enough to support that tremendous pressure and weight of rock, and knew a moment of fear.

He fought that off.

"Get your tools," Noyles ordered. "We were at the end of this tunnel when work stopped last time."

They moved through the tunnel, pushing the darkness back with the flickering yellow light of their candles. Noyles lit a cigarette as they walked, and the flame of his match painted a ruddy pattern on his face. At one place Noyles stopped, bent, examining the wall timbers.

"We'll have to build this up," he grunted. "Not as strong as it could be."

They moved on after a minute, and Paddy Wallin halted at the end of a few feet, testing the air with suspicious nostrils.

A miner said nervously, "What's the matter?"

"Thought I smelled something!" Wallin turned, sniffing the air. Then Hendry caught it, or he thought he caught it, a thin trace of odor that was like the smell of burning powder—like a fuse! A chill traced his spine, but he held his silence.

Wallin started slowly back through the tunnel, followed by his son, a man whose leg had been twisted by some past mine accident. They halted, exploring the wall, searching the rubble, slowly at first, then almost frantically.

Paddy Wallin yelled hoarsely, "A fuse! Get back all of you—back, Ollie!"

Ollie caught his father's shoulders, sent the oldster spinning away from the tunnel wall. Ollie tried to leap clear, but his twisted leg killed his speed. There was a blinding thunder of flame that seemed to belch out of the tunnel's floor; there was Ollie Wallin's thin, agonized scream, an earth-shaking roar of falling rock and timber. The concussion hurled Ruck Hendry to the rocky floor, stunning him. . . .

Suddenly the light went out.

CHAPTER THREE

Killer's Grave

HOW long he had been sitting there on the mine floor since returning to consciousness, Ruck did not know; but he had been dazedly watching the single lantern hanging from a spike in a ceiling timber, and since the explosion its guttering flame had cast its feeble glow across the strained faces of the miners.

Now that light was gone, all oxygen at the tunnel's ceiling level burned out by the last struggling of the flame. But the picture of the faces of the men crouching around him was still etched into Ruck Hendry's mind.

He knew his own features must be like theirs—red-shot eyes and thin-drawn lips, jaw muscles that ached from the tight-bitten fight against panic. But it was different with Ruck Hendry; it was harder on him. Those men around him were miners who had been stoically aware of the risks they ran. Ruck was a cowman who had known only the wide reaches of the range, with its sunlight and starry nights, where neither heat nor brawling storms could take the clean freshness from the air.

A mine tunnel was a new world for Ruck. It was a black and cramped world, wet and chill, where the raw inner bones of the earth constantly threatened to crush the invaders who had burrowed in, searching for copper ore. The air at its best had been dank in Hendry's lungs; now it was stale, tainted with the acrid fumes of giant powder. Air like that, with its remaining oxygen rapidly being exhausted, wouldn't keep life in a man for long. Even the subterranean silence seemed heavy with its own black menace.

Across the tunnel, Paddy Wallin's breathing made a shallow, papery sound.

"How's he doing?" Ruck asked.

The darkness gave back Mack O'Bannon's low bitter oath. "No good a-tall. The rock fall busted him up inside. He's bleedin' at the mouth."

Somewhere a miner cursed with savage heat. "Damn the murderin' snake who set off that blast!"

"Cussin' won't do any good," O'Bannon said. "Try moving some of them rocks."

Another man said in a voice that was edged with panic, "That blast dropped ten ton of rock and timbers, and there ain't enough air left for us to move all that. We're as good as dead now!"

O'Bannon said, "Shut up, Noyles!"

"It's the truth, ain't it! Sure it is, and you know it! We ain't got a chance."

Ruck Hendry said, "Shut up, Noyles!"

Ruck groped through the blackness until he was at O'Bannon's side. Now Paddy Wallin's breathing seemed thinner, scraping through pain-drawn lips. Hendry drifted his hands along the miner's body, and his touch found the blood that bubbled from the man's lips at each shallow breath.

"Light a match, and maybe we can do something for him," Hendry suggested.

The mine foreman's voice rubbed back through the darkness. "A match would only burn up more air, and there's nothing we can do. He's unconscious, and he's better off that way."

Wallin's thin whisper came up to them. "I ain't unconscious, Mack."

"Take it easy, Paddy."

"I heard everything you said, boss. I'm finished, ain't I?"

O'Bannon tried to put hope into his tone. "I was just tryin' to get a rise out of you. You got a swell chance, Paddy. Sure you have. They'll dig us out in no time at all, and then we'll get you to a doctor."

"You always were a hell of a liar," Wallin murmured.

Silence wrapped around the tunnel again, and this was the part that was hard for Hendry to take, the futile waiting. It was harder on him than any of the rest. He didn't have a miner's fatalism; he was just a cowman who had tried to put a stop to the troubles that haunted the Copper Queen in order to sell his herd of beef.

"Mack?" It was Paddy Wallin's thin whisper. The dying man didn't wait for O'Bannon's answer. An urgency was in his tone, as though he was trying to hold back the final moment he knew was drawing near.

"Mack, I'm finished. I know—"

"You'll live to lick any jack on the payroll," O'Bannon said gruffly.

"I don't care about myself, Mack. It's my boy I'm worried about. How did Ollie make out?"

O'Bannon hesitated. Then he said, "Ollie is okay."

The oldest murmured fiercely. "I got to know the truth, Mack."

"You're getting it. Ollie is all right. You could talk to him, except he's at the other end of the tunnel, trying to find a way out. Ollie is all right."

The oldest was silent a moment, and under his hand Ruck could feel the shallow rise and fall of the man's crushed chest. O'Bannon had lied, and every man there knew it. But a lie had been best.

Paddy's whisper came again, fainter now, fading. "I remember how it happened. Me and Ollie were followin' you in here, and my boy was a little ahead of me. I smelled a fuse burnin', and somethin' told me there was goin' to be a blast. You get so you can sort of feel trouble when you've mined as long as me.

"So I yelled a warnin'. Yeah, that's what I did. Then I started huntin' the fuse to pinch it out. But Ollie came back to help me. I remember now—my boy came back. Then the blast went off. . . ."

Ruck said, "Save your strength, Paddy."

Wallin murmured, "You always were a hell of a liar, Mack."

O'Bannon said softly, "I've got your pipe here, Paddy. You want a smoke?"

The miner didn't answer.

DEATH had taken the pain out of old Paddy Wallin's crushed body, and the air in the blocked tunnel was rapidly growing stale and useless. Even the darkness hurt; it was so black. Ruck Hendry found himself staring achingly for some little ray of light that could ease his eyes. But there was none.

At first the waiting hadn't been so hard. But they were near the end of the short tunnel, and a dozen pumping lungs were a quick drain on the remaining oxygen. Breathing became difficult as an hour came and passed, and Ruck, like the rest, was like a runner sucking in air. He couldn't get enough of it, and his heart protested, slugging the walls of his chest.

Distantly, almost like a vibration traveling through the rocky bones of the earth, Ruck could hear the rescuers Nora Scott had called after the explosion. The sounds were faint and dull on the far side of the cave-in, mocking the futile hopes of the trapped men.

"They can't make it in time," a miner said dully.

"At least we can hope," Mack O'Bannon said.

Somewhere in that blackness, Dane Noyles uttered a laugh of wild derision; it might have been terror that gave him strength.

"What good is hoping?" Noyles croaked. "We're done for! You know it, and I know it.

We can't live without air, and what's left won't last much longer. We'll all be dead when they get here."

Ruck said without passion, "Shut up, Noyles!"

"Don't tell me to shut up!" Noyles cursed. "I'm going to die because you thought I was behind everything that's happened to this mine."

"I was wrong about that," Ruck said dully. His brain seemed thick and sluggish. He tried to keep his thoughts alive by force. Yes, he had been wrong about Dane Noyles. The man was trapped here like the rest of them, wasn't he?

"Being wrong about me won't save my life," Noyles ranted. "I'll die like the rest of you, sitting here and waiting."

Ruck said, thickly, "As long as we sit still we'll make the air last longer. No sense gettin' everybody all worked up, Noyles."

Noyles was doing that with his high-pitched, wild voice. He was driving panic into the miners, crowding them to the place where quiet reasoning would give way to madness. If they broke, they would tear futilely at the debris that blocked the tunnel, and they would only succeed in bringing oblivion to them sooner. As long as they lived, there was hope. . . .

"It'll be like drowning, only worse—"

"Damn you, I said shut up!" Ruck flared.

He got to his feet; a dizziness swept through him. Panic's hot fingers prodding his brain. It was the constant fighting for air that no longer existed, the constant riding of Noyles' harsh voice that was so maddening. He started hunting the darkness for Noyles.

"Take it easy, Hendry," Mack O'Bannon's voice said.

Ruck stumbled on, remembering where Noyles had been before the lantern went out, and searching for the man with single-minded stubbornness. His outstretched hands touched Noyles.

"I told you to shut up!"

A fist crashed against Ruck's mouth. He stumbled backward, hit the opposite wall and slid to the floor. He got up again, found Noyles, and something close to madness flared through his brain. He used his fists savagely, viciously.

Noyles had surprising strength that somehow had not been sapped by lack of air, but Ruck had no sense of pain. He crowded in, butting and slugging. He wasn't aware of when Noyles finally went down.

O'Bannon's hands pulled him off the unconscious man. "Snap out of it, Hendry!" O'Bannon cursed. "You've made the men go wild. Nothin' can stop them now."

Face down at the edge of the tunnel floor, Ruck hardly heard the man's harsh words.

Clean, pure air was pumping into his lungs, clearing his brain and giving him a new strength. He rolled over, pushed to his knees, hearing for the first time the mad fighting of the miners against the debris that blocked the tunnel. He drove reasoning into them by the sheer urgency of his shout.

"Stop it, you fools—stop fighting them rocks and come here. *I've found air!* There's a place down here by the bottom of the wall where air is gettin' in! O'Bannon, drag those fools back here, and we'll all live to get out!"

THE white glare of daylight hurt Ruck Hendry's eyes. He stood there beside the shaft house, grimy with dirt and scarred by his fight with Dane Noyles in the mine tunnel.

Strain was still in the faces of the miners, and Nora Scott was saying, "I ran for help when I heard the explosion. Someone must have set that charge last night."

Ruck nodded. "I reckon."

He noticed the broken track Sid Warner's shoe made in the dust, and that added in with the bleak thoughts in his mind. He fastened his glance on Dane Noyles, who stood near Warner and Link Caven.

"You set that charge in the tunnel, Noyles."

Ruck's voice was a flat sound that killed all other talking. Dane Noyles wheeled around, and his stare pin-pointed on Hendry.

"You set that blast last night while Warner and Caven were stampeding my cattle," Ruck said again.

Noyles' face darkened, but gray was around the pinch of his mouth. Sid Warner cursed, and every line of his body was suddenly taut. Link Caven grinned queerly, took a single long step to one side, and halted there, waiting.

Noyles said, with rising heat, "I told you Warner and Caven were with me last night."

Ruck shook his head slowly. "I threw a shot at one of the stampeders last night, but my slug was low. All I did was cut the sole of his boot, so he'd leave tracks like I just saw Warner make in the dust. Huh-uh, them two weren't with you, Noyles."

It was the coolness, the inexorable drag of Ruck Hendry's accusation that roughed up Dane Noyles' temper.

"Do you think I'd be fool enough to blast a tunnel that I was in!" he flared.

Ruck nodded coldly. "Uh-huh, but you weren't a fool, Noyles—you were smart! No one would think you guilty if you were trapped like the rest of us, and you knew Nora would abandon the Copper Queen if everyone with you in the tunnel were killed. And with Nora gone, you'd be the owner."

"But you didn't take any chance yourself, Noyles. You tried to drive all of us loco with your talk down there, but you didn't count on

a fight that would get you knocked out. While you were unconscious, I rooted around in the corner of the tunnel. I found the iron piping you planted there so you could get air while the rest of us died after the blast. You must have lit the fuse with your cigarette when you stopped to examine the timber you said was weak—"

"Get him!" Noyles yelled.

It broke like that, as swiftly and suddenly as a word. Sid Warner got his gun up first, but he hurried his shot, and his slug went wild. Ruck Hendry threw a bullet into Warner, and saw the man spin and go down. He faded to one side and felt Link Caven's slug burn a hot track across the flesh of his shoulder. Then there was no longer any connected pattern to the fight, no moment that was ever fully clear in Ruck's brain.

Link Caven screamed and folded grotesquely, clutching his middle, but Ruck knew he had fired only by the kick of recoil against his bent elbow. Dane Noyles was backing away, firing as he walked, his face dark with hatred and fury.

Ruck's left leg went dead, pitching him to the ground. He pushed up from the dust to see Dane Noyles running toward a saddled horse.

Ruck yelled, "Back here, Noyles!" and that brought the man around, violently. Ruck saw the black smokeburst of the killer's shot as he let his own gun hammer drop. Noyles spun, started to run for the horse, and Ruck thought for a moment he had missed. Then the killer's run changed to a loose shamble; he tripped over his own feet, and he didn't move.

"I'LL have the Queen out of the red inside a month," Nora Scott said.

Ruck Hendry examined the bandage where the bullet had struck the flesh above his knee. He tested his leg, and strength was coming back. The wound hurt, but he had to ride. He could have the wound dressed again in one of the towns along his back trail.

"You've no business riding now," the girl said severely. "Why don't you stay—" she colored slightly—"and help me run the mine?"

Ruck considered that, tempted for a moment. But there was his ranch down in the Bighorns to be tended, the few calves that had survived to be branded, hay to be put up for the next winter, that mortgage note to be met.

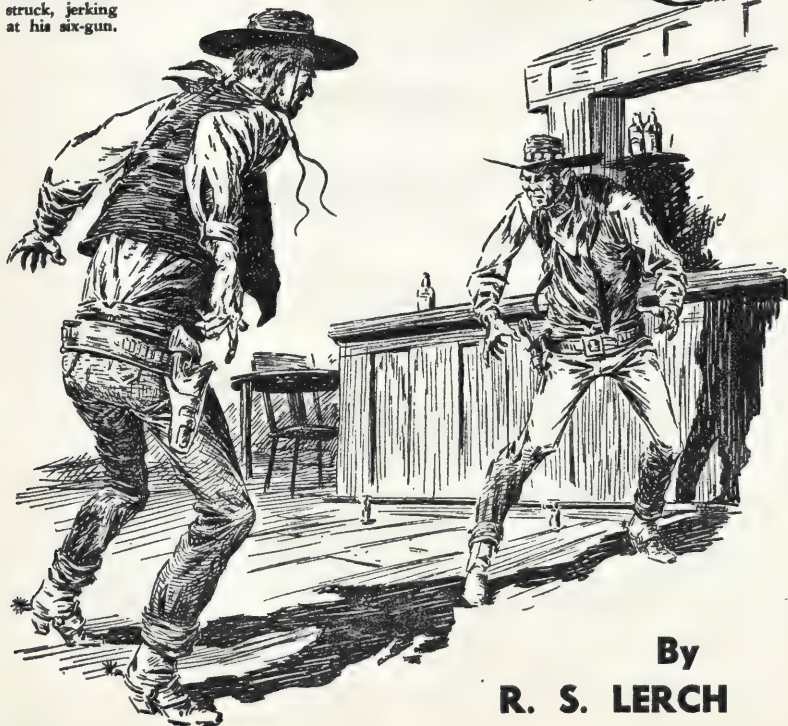
"I've got a better idea," he said, and an infinite urgency was behind his words. "You've got a good crew here, and Mack O'Bannon would make a mine manager who could take care of everything without having you around."

"Why don't you—" and he was almost afraid to ask his question, afraid she would refuse—"why don't you come down, and help me run my ranch?"

The Man from Hell

*"Diehard don't need no law hawk.
I'm giving you till midnight to get
out of town. After that, you can
stay here permanently—in a wood-
en kimona!"*

The time had
run out. He
struck, jerking
at his six-gun.



IF THE man who rode the tired pinto down the main street of Diehard was aware of the reputation of this rejuvenated ghost town, if he knew the brand of welcome strangers were liable to receive, he gave no evidence of it. Covered with trail dust and sagging with weariness, he seemed no more interested in Diehard than the tired-shuffling pinto that carried him.

The little man with the hatchet face and mouth like a knife slash lowered his feet from the broad window-sill in the hotel lobby and leaned forward in his chair. His gaze at the new arrival was narrow and speculative. When the rider had passed the man arose and crossed the street to the Grubstake Saloon.

There was nothing about the rider to in-

By
R. S. LERCH

dicate that he had noticed the man. Nor did he give any evidence of seeing the face behind the dirt-caked, second-floor window of a long-deserted opera house a little farther down the street. Yet this time he raised a hand and pulled his Stetson a little lower, as if to shade his eyes from the sinking sun. The face which had appeared only for an instant in the window was a gray, ghostly face, ravaged by horror and hate, desperation and suffering.

The rider dismounted at the stable and shot a glance back along the street. There was no weariness in his eyes. They were a light blue, alive and intent. Three men were crossing from the Grubstake to the hotel. He watched them a moment, then the sound of low voices from inside the barn swung him toward the wide doorway.

A wiry little man appeared, leaving a room that was blue with tobacco haze. The stranger asked, "Do you know a little fellow with a sharp face and bowed legs?"

"I know a half-dozen," the gray-haired stableman said shortly.

"This waddy walks with his head thrust forward like a turkey buzzard and he's got a beak like one."

"Might be Lizard Lip Blinn."

"And a big bull of a man who wears two guns, a yellow shirt, and has silver conchas on his hatband?"

"Might be Jabe Killgore."

"And another big man, wears a black frock coat and black hat, a heavy mustache?"

"Might be Mat Kanzene," and now the little man looked more closely at the stranger, noted the piercing quality of the pupils in those blue eyes, the long, supple muscles in the slight frame, the way his tied-down six-gun hung, and the strong lines and sharp angles of his clean-shaven jaw.

Quick interest appeared in the stableman's eyes, yet there was caution there, too.

"Friends of yours?" he ventured.

The stranger looked at him a moment without blinking, then said a little thinly, "Far as I know I never saw them in my life, till just now. They're not friends of mine. I've only got one friend, and he ain't their type."

The stable owner frowned a little as he took the reins to lead the pinto into the stable. He tried again.

"Mat Kanzene didn't hire you to ride for him?"

"Ride for him? I thought this was a mining country and a mining town?"

"It is, but Kanzene hires riders—who can handle guns. If you ain't workin' for him I reckon I could find you a job—you and your six-gun. Or maybe you got a job already? Maybe you're a lawman?"

As he talked the little man was leading the pinto into the stable, with the stranger follow-

ing. They passed the partly open door out of which he had come and the stranger saw three grizzled old-timers seated around a table. Their hair was gray and the deep lines in their faces had not all resulted from age and the tough life of the frontier. There was sign of grim determination on their stern features.

The newcomer slipped a coin into the stableman's hand and gave directions for the care of his pony, then turned back toward the door. The old man followed. Just before reaching the door he said almost querulously:

"You ain't answered my question. Who are you? Are you a lawman?"

The stranger looked back over his shoulder, replied shortly, "Brother, you ask too damned many questions," and kept on walking.

The three who had left the saloon were now seated in the hotel lobby. Apparently they made no more than casual appraisal of the stranger when he crossed to the counter at the back. The shifty-eyed clerk swung a dog-eared register around and flipped out a pencil stub fastened by a string to the binding of the book. The man signed, "Jonathan Cross, Hell, Montana." He dropped the pencil, then, and looked up.

The clerk was in the act of giving a faint nod to one of the three seated before the broad window. If Cross noticed it, or caught the sharp gaze of the weasel-faced Lizard Lip fastened on his holster, he gave no sign. The only distinctive feature about that gun-leather was a thin line of silver stitching along the outer edges.

The clerk said unctuously, "Room thirteen, second floor back," and placed a key on the register.

Cross picked up the key and turned to the doorway at the left of the counter. Beyond this another door led to the dining room, and between the two a set of stairs ascended to the second story.

Cross found room thirteen at the right rear of the hall. He paused before the door and stood for a moment in strained attention. His fatigue had dropped away. With head bent forward alertly, he waited for a warning that someone was inside. None came. He unlocked and opened the door with his left hand, then swung it back against the wall—hard. No one was waiting behind it.

Across the room was a table holding a tin basin and a chipped enamel pitcher. Beside this was a straight-backed chair and over to the left, beside a window looking out onto an alley, was a lumpy bed. In the wall to his right was a door to another room. Closing and locking the door, he advanced to the center of the room, then stopped and looked around slowly, examining closely the floor, the ceiling, and the walls.

His gaze finally settled on what appeared to

be a small spot on the wallpaper, blacker than the dirt surrounding it. Walking over, he discovered it was a tiny hole.

"Uh-huh! Observation room," he muttered and moved to the connecting door. It was bolted on the other side. Examining it, he discovered oil spots on the hinges.

Finally he went to the table, poured water into the basin, and washed. This done, he hung his belt and gun-filled holster over the back of the chair, then stretched out on the bed, his arms resting along his sides, his right knee drawn up slightly. Weariness and relaxation were evident in every line of his body. He closed his eyes and soon his breathing took on a deeper, more even cadence.

AFTER awhile there were faint sounds from the adjoining room, soft, rustling sounds. A slight metallic click followed. Then silence again. After a little the door connecting the two rooms swung soundlessly open.

Three men stepped into the room. Mat Kanzenze was in the lead. His hands were empty. Directly behind him came Lizard Lip Blinn and Jabe Killgore. They stepped to each side of Kanzenze, and their hands were gun-filled.

"You c'n wake up now, Silver Jack," Kanzenze challenged in a loud voice. "You ain't fooled nobody."

Cross opened his eyes, but otherwise made no move. Killgore and Lizard Lip relaxed. When he saw the belt and gun hanging from the back of the chair the huge Killgore even grinned a little and let his leveled six-gun sag.

"Didn't figure on foolin' anybody," the man on the bed said lazily. "Why should I? You're th' big splash in this pond, eh, Kanzenze? Why this personal call on a tired waddy who only wants to rest and be let alone?"

"I said you wasn't foolin' anybody," Kanzenze repeated harshly. "Diehard don't need no law hawk. I'm giving you till midnight to get out of town. After that you can stay—permanently. And that's giving you more of a break than you gave the boys in Santone."

The Silver Cross grunted.

"I remember now. Lizard Lip was in the Santone vigilante riot two years ago. But you're wrong, Kanzenze. I'm no longer an officer."

Kanzenze's cold, black eyes did not waver nor his face change expression.

"I never heard of Hell in Montana. Where is it?"

Cross shook his head slowly. "It ain't there—now. I brought it with me."

"What damned nonsense is that?" Kanzenze barked. "Why are you here, Cross?"

"That," and the voice of the man on the bed was now as level and cold as Kanzenze's had been, "is none of your damned business."

The bulky Jabe Killgore muttered a curse and his gun lifted. Lizard Lip Blinn tightened his finger on the trigger of the gun he had kept on Silver Jack. He was suddenly tense, his forward-thrust head and rapacious eyes more than ever resembling those of a bird of prey. There was still no expression on Mat Kanzenze's face or in his black, reptilian eyes.

"I think," Diehard's ruler said slowly, "we won't wait till midnight."

Lizard Lip leaned a little farther forward. Big Jabe Killgore set himself. Kanzenze started to turn, as if to give an order or a signal to his pair of gun-hungry killers.

"Wait!" The order cracked like a rifle shot from Silver Jack.

Kanzenze swung back to face the bed.

"Before you commit suicide," Cross said thinly, "take a closer look at my right leg."

The big man's gaze shifted from the face to the bent right knee of the man on the bed. Almost concealed by the folds of his Levis beneath the angle of the right knee, and resting on top of the left thigh, the muzzle of a six-gun was centered on a spot two inches above the lowest button of Kanzenze's fancy vest. When Silver Jack spoke again his voice was still level, but it held a quality of deadliness that was unmistakable.

"Tell your gun-dummies to drop their irons and back out of the room. Then you follow. *Steady, Blinn,*" and the last two words were snapped as Lizard Lip went into a half crouch.

Kanzenze's face lost a little of its color. He had caught that movement of his gun-slick, and knew what it meant. He had also seen that the muzzle of the gun in Cross's hand had not wavered in the slightest. He growled hastily:

"Do like he says, boys."

Killgore growled. Lizard Lip hissed. And then both relaxed their grips and let their guns clatter to the floor. They backed out slowly, reluctantly, their eyes afire with sudden hate and rage. Kanzenze waited. Finally Silver Jack nodded.

"All right, Kanzenze."

The boss of Diehard turned his back on Cross and strode to the door. Then he looked back over his shoulder.

"I'll give you an hour," he said softly.

Silver Jack said, "Shut the door."

Kanzenze slammed it and the sound had not died before Cross had rolled and was flat on the floor. Two heavy shots hammered from the next room; two holes appeared in the flimsy door, and the lumpy mattress jerked twice. And merging with the sound of those shots was the crack of Silver Jack's six-gun as he drove lead slanting upward at door-knob level. A muttered curse was followed by the sound of footsteps hurrying out of the adjoining room and down the hall.

Silver Jack picked up the two six-guns and went to the window. It was getting dusk outside now, and lights were appearing in the windows of the shanties and houses across the alley. He waited a little and when it was fully dark he softly opened the door and looked down the corridor. No one was in sight. He descended to the dining room.

He had thought he was late for dinner, but when he stepped into the room he saw at least a dozen men there. At one table he recognized the owner of the livery stable and the three who had been with him when Silver Jack had left his pinto. Among the others was a scattering of slit-eyed gunmen. There was no betrayal on his face of the knowledge that all eyes were turned toward him.

After a little he understood. Word of his run-in with Kanzene and his two guards must have got out. The inhabitants of Diehard wanted a close look at the man who had defied the all-powerful boss of the district. And others, of Kanzene's clique, wanted a good look at the man they would take care of.

He was eating the meal the shuffle-footed Chinaman had brought when the Oriental appeared again, this time with a second cup of coffee. After the cup was placed Silver Jack saw the corner of a small slip of paper protruding from beneath it. It was some minutes before he managed to palm the paper unseen and to glance at it under cover of the table top. It said:

"Meet us at the stable in an hour," and it was signed, "Alec Hume, stable owner."

He crushed the note and covertly thrust it into a Levis pocket. His meal all but finished, he glanced out of the wide window. A man lounged in the shadow of the Grubstake Saloon across the street. Farther down, between two darkened buildings, a cigarette glowed briefly and was extinguished. Up the other way there was a faint movement behind the paneless window of an uninhabited shack. Silver Jack had no doubt there were other watchers on the same side of the street as the hotel.

Most of those in the dining room, having had their look, had left while he was eating. The four at the table were watching him covertly. Silver Jack arose and ascended to his room. Again he was cautious about entering. No one was there, and the connecting door to the room from which Kanzene and his guards had appeared was again locked.

CROSS went to the window and looked down into the alley, searching the shadows around the buildings facing the next street. Nothing moved there. Nowhere could he detect a watcher. Finally he raised the window. The roof of a storm-shed in front of the hotel's back door was just below him. He lowered himself until his feet touched its sloping roof, then let go, slid to the edge and dropped to the ground. He eased cautiously toward the rear of the old opera house three buildings away.

Silver Jack crouched a little distance away and watched the building. There was something in the night air, some suggestion of sound or smell, something subconsciously seen but not recognized, that cried a warning to him. It became clearer—the sound of voices, so faint as almost to be unrecognizable as such. He could not even determine the direction of the voices. Then came a louder noise, two of them—a pair of six-gun shots. They seemed to have come from inside the ancient opera house.

He picked his way through the litter with all the speed consistent with silence and caution and eased past the sagging stage door, along a short corridor, and found himself near the rear center of a small stage. There was a creaking noise at the front of the house and for an instant he saw an oblong of gray appear in the gloom. A door had been opened. The form of a man showed in it, and was gone. No closer view was needed for Silver Jack to know that Mat Kanzene had been in the building and had just left.

He waited a moment longer, listening closely. Tattered curtains and a forlorn backdrop hung from somewhere in the blackness above. The stink of dry rot filled the place like a miasma, and the ghosts of old and present tragedies seemed to float invisibly in the dead air about him. In the wings at his right, rickety stairs led to the balcony that surrounded the well of the theater. He saw, dimly, two other sets of stairs on each side of the front entrance.

Kanzene might have come down those front stairs. It was in the windows above that far end of the balcony that he had seen the ghostly face as he rode along Diehard's main street. And then his straining ears caught the sound of a low, shuddering groan. He called cautiously, "Bill Devers?"

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An answer that was instinct with pain came from somewhere out in the dark.

"That you—Jack?"

"Yes. Where are you?"

"Balcony—up front," and the voice trailed off to silence.

Silver Jack Cross headed for the nearest stairs, careless of the noise he made. He was remembering now those two shots he had heard before entering. He found the man stretched out on the floor behind the seats. Faint light from the windows showed him staring up with pain-filled eyes. His breathing was a rasping sound in his throat and both hands were pressed against his stomach, hard. He stared up at the man who knelt beside him and his words came jerkily, between gasps.

"You did come—Jack. I been hiding and hoping, and watching and waiting, and maybe praying a little."

"I got your letter," Cross said quickly, "telling that Cort Handy had been released from prison and had threatened the Judge's life and that you had to be away with a trail herd. But I'd been away too, and the letter had been waiting a couple of weeks. I reached your ranch after it was all over and learned Cort had set fire to the house at night and that the Judge and Ella had been burned alive. Bandy gave me the note you'd left for me stating you were taking Cort's trail.

"I figured I had most as big a stake in this as you, since your wife was my sister. I got your notes at each town you'd stopped at, telling where you were heading next, and got here quick as I could. But—" and here Silver Jack Cross leaned closer, his eyes dark and piercing, his mouth a tight line, "you said that Cort Handy had just been here, had done this to you? The man I saw was Mat Kanzene."

Devers seemed to have gathered a little strength while his brother-in-law was talking. He nodded his head slightly.

"Kanzene—is Cort Handy. He reached here about a month ago, bought out the Grubstake Saloon with the money he'd taken from our safe at the ranch, and organized his gun-slinging crew to spread death and ruin among the miners at the new diggings. He or his men own a dozen claims now. Their former owners just—disappeared."

"Mat Kanzene is Cort Handy—and I had my gun on him for two minutes without firing a shot," Silver Jack whispered bitterly.

The wounded man's eyes brightened a little as he watched the man beside him.

"They put you in room thirteen, huh? They did me—too. I was in bed when they came. I got out by diving through the window, leavin' my gun behind. That's why I been holed up here. Cort or one of his gun-guards, saw me at the window—and I reckon noticed the old signal of you pullin' your hat

down, th' one we used up in Santone. So Cort knows you'll be coming here to me."

Devers paused, breathing hard with his eyes closed. From somewhere within the old building timbers groaned. The wounded man's eyes popped open. Though Silver Jack Cross motioned him to silence, he began to talk hurriedly.

"Listen, Jack. You gotta—get out of here—fast. I'm done for anyway. Can't last—another hour. Cort knows about you now. When he came here—I knew it was to finish me off personal—I taunted him that he wouldn't live to get—the taste of my murder—out of his mouth. He guessed, then, why you came. He'll have a dozen of his men inside here in another two minutes. If you—got extra—gun—leave it. I'll get some—of them—anyway."

The timbers groaned again in another part of the ghostly building. There were other faint sounds, sliding noises, sounds of something soft striking something hard, the sibilance of cautious breathing, the creaking of stair treads.

Silver Jack leaned close to the dying man and drew the two guns he had taken from Kanzene's guards. Devers whispered:

"Turn me over—so I'll face—one of the front stairs. While I live—no one'll get past. You take—other side, work your way to the back—and—escape."

Cross made no reply, but carefully rolled his brother-in-law over so that he lay prone, facing one well of the two front stairs. Devers bit his lip hard to stifle a groan as he was turned. Then, resting his arms on the elbows he motioned Silver Jack to put the guns in his hands. Cross placed them there, put a hand on Bill Devers' shoulder and gave it a quick pressure, then began to work his way behind the seats to the side balcony.

Halfway toward the stage he crouched low and moved down an aisle to the parapet. He raised his head until he could see into the pit. The long minutes of gloom and the peculiar quality of penetration in his pale blue eyes now resulted in a night vision that outlined objects for him even in the gloom close to the far wall.

There were movements down there from three or four spots. One was at the foot of the stairs near the stage. A man was just starting up. Two others were working their way along the wall. A fourth was just mounting the front stairs, and a fifth was already nearing their top. As Cross glimpsed this last man, his body disappeared and only his legs were visible. Silver Jack drew his hide-out gun, and both hands were Colt-filled.

THESE were a split second of complete silence, like that instant between the release and the fall of a gun hammer. And then the old theater rocked with gunfire, and

a drama in life and death more barbaric than any ever enacted on its stage rose to a deadly climax.

Shots sounded from the guns of Bill Devers first and the first man up pitched backward down the stairs as Silver Jack went into action. The falling man struck the one mounting behind him. Both went down and both lay still. Silver Jack's first pair of shots had been directed at the bottom man. The one on the rear stairs raced to the top, disappeared, and reappeared moving along the opposite balcony. Gunfire winked at Cross from down in the well of the theater. Pounding footsteps hurried up the stairs from the stage on his side of the house. Other men, beneath him and hidden by the balcony, ran toward the front stairs on his side.

Cross fired three times at the man moving toward Devers along the opposite balcony. The man pitched down on his face at the third shot. Silver Jack swung his second gun and opened up fast on the lead-throwing gunnies in the pit. One of them cursed, but he didn't go down. And then something from the stage end of the balcony hit Cross a slap in the left shoulder. He spun around with the force of the forty-five slug, and in the midst of his spin thumbed the hammer twice. A wild yell that was choked off suddenly was followed by the bumping of an inert body on the stairs.

As he spun his legs struck one of the seats and he sat down. From the front Bill Devers'

guns were pounding again, and other guns were answering. Seated, fighting the weakness that tried to engulf him, Silver Jack placed one gun in his lap while he punched out empties and thrust fresh shells into the cylinder of the other. That done, he thrust the loaded gun into his waistband and worked with the other. It was awkward, for the fingers of his left hand were getting numb and it was becoming increasingly difficult to make them obey his will. He could hear men searching for him, but they did not have the night eyes he had. He was careful to make as little sound as possible and to keep his moving hands low.

Another man was up the stage stairs on his side and working toward him along the passage behind the seats. A second was coming from the front. The two who had been across from him in the pit had reached the front stairs and were mounting toward Devers.

And then the quiet was smashed again, and again the old building rocked to thundering six-gun fire. Silver Jack threw two quick shots at the man coming toward him from the rear, then leaped ahead and crouched in the aisle while lead shattered the back of the seat he had been in. At the front of the balcony red gun blasts rolled again. Jack Cross eased forward toward the aisle behind the seats. His left hand and arm were useless now. No sound came from the man who had been moving up from the stage. The other made soft noises as he inched ahead.

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X-RAY VIEW

Jack bunched his muscles, then like a striking colgar leaped into the open, spinning to face the front. A black blotch not fifteen feet away moved quickly, and three red roses bloomed at the muzzle of a gun. The last one came from low down. Silver Jack Cross had triggered twice before the first gun-blossom had died. The black blotch on the floor was not now moving. Cross turned, bringing his six-gun around toward the stage end of the gallery. There was another shadow lying on the floor of the aisle. It wasn't moving either. And there was silence up front, too.

He cat-footed along the balcony toward Devers. Passing the man he had last killed, he recognized the reptilian Lizard Lip Blinn. He saw the two men at the head of the stairs first. One lay sprawled out full length on the floor. Big Jabe Killgore was only half on the balcony; his head and arms were hanging limply over the edge. Devers had not moved.

Silver Jack Cross straightened and walked forward openly, his booted feet making the only sound in the vast emptiness of the theater of death. He looked down at the lead-riddled body of his dead sister's husband. The shot that had ended Devers' suffering must have come from a man dying when he fired. It had smashed through the top of Bill's head, ending his suffering instantly. Stony-faced Silver Jack stood for a long moment, then dropped the empty gun beside his friend and walked toward the stairs.

He descended slowly, turned to the entrance and opened the door, and stalked across the street toward the Grubstake Saloon. There was silence in the street, but the street was not empty. Every inhabitant and visitor in Diehard was there, packed near the theater from which had come the sound of gun-fighting in the dark. Silently they made a path and watched the grim-faced, wounded man, who did not seem to see them, stalk toward the headquarters of Mat Kanzene. Silently they closed in behind him and followed.

He didn't pause to scout; he shoved his wounded shoulder against the bat-wings and stepped through into a saloon empty save for one man. Mat Kanzene, alias Cort Handy, stood in the center of the big room. His frock coat was off and his pearl-handled six-gun exposed. His right hand gripped the butt and his cold, black eyes were still expressionless. He had known he must meet Silver Jack Cross if he came out of the theater alive, or be finished in Diehard. To run would be to become a despised and hunted man for the balance of his days.

Silver Jack halted, his legs spread wide, and for a moment there was silence between the two. Then Cross spoke, and his voice was like the hoarse croaking of a raven.

"My hour ain't up yet. I got a job to do

first. A little while ago you shot an unarmed, helpless man, the best friend and the last relative I had."

Kanzene made no reply. Cross waited, and the time ran out. For an instant fear washed across Kanzene's face. Then he struck, jerking at his six-gun. There was only one shot. Mat Kanzene's gun had failed even to clear leather.

Silver Jack Cross stepped forward and looked down. Kanzene's lifeless, black eyes formed the base of a triangle whose apex was a hole in the exact center of his forehead. Returning the six-gun to its leather, Silver Jack walked out of the saloon and headed for the stables.

Once more men faded away on either side to let him pass, then closed in behind him. This time there were excited voices, questions, calls. Apparently he neither heard nor saw. Turning at the stable he called for the proprietor.

There was no answer.

He looked around slowly, a puzzled frown gathering.

A man waved back the crowd. Four others joined the first man. This man, the little, gray-haired owner of the stables, came forward and laid a hand on Silver Jack's arm.

"You can't ride now, son. You're wounded. Come into the office and let the doc look at you. You said somethin' about your last friend bein' dead."

"Hell! You got a town full of friends now."

The friendly voice of the old man brought Silver Jack Cross out of the hell in which he had been living. He looked at the little man, and then his gaze switched to the others. A faint trace of a smile appeared on his lips, and then his eyes rolled upward to show the whites and he fell.

THE doctor looked up after his work was finished. The five men, with their unconscious patient stretched out on a table, were closeted in the office of the livery stable.

"Will he live?" the stableman whispered anxiously.

The doctor snorted. "Still want him for marshal, eh? Well, you'll get him. Bullet hole in right chest, too high to more than graze the lungs. Another through his left deltoid and a couple along his ribs. There ain't any of you old buzzards, even in your best days, who'd have stayed on his bow legs and come through what this lad has. All he needs is rest and a chance to make up some of the blood he's lost."

"And by that time he'll know he's got a new home here with us," the stableman breathed.

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



By **HALLACK McCORD**

Howdy, buckaroos. . . tenderfeet and all. Here's this month's chance to show off your knowledge of cowpunchers, miners, trappers, badmen, and a host of other western subjects. Below are listed twenty questions. If you can answer more than eighteen of them correctly, you rank in the same class with the died-in-the-wool Westerner. If you answer sixteen or more, you're plenty good. If fifteen, well, you're not yet in the tenderfoot class. Best of luck, pardners!

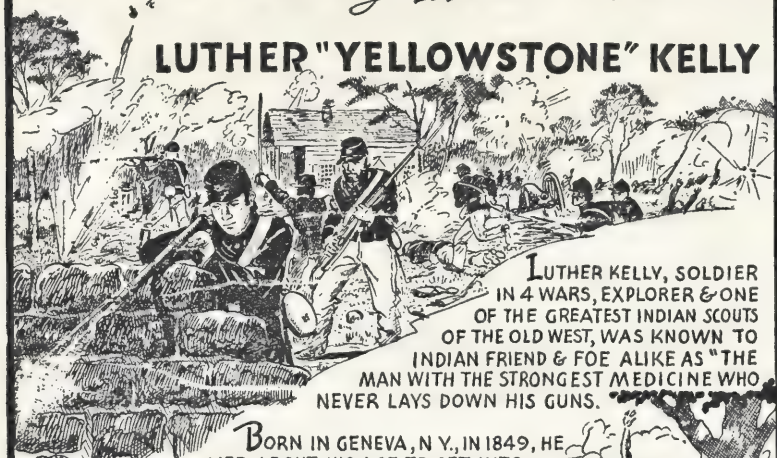
1. In the language of the cowpuncher, what is the meaning of the word "haze"?
2. True or false? The majority of range cattle are branded on the right hip.
3. Off the cattle drive, stops, starts, and other directions are often indicated by a system of signals. If the foreman of a party wanted to stop, how would he signal this to his men?
4. What is the meaning of the term "road branding," when used in reference to the early western cattle drive?
5. Why might a cowpuncher, entirely in his right mind, arrange a horsehair line about his bedroll before going to sleep on the desert?
6. In the language of the cowpoke, an "iron-man" is: A very strong person? One who keeps the irons hot during branding? A man who carries more than one shooting iron? A man engaged in the old iron business?
7. What well-known brand was once adopted in memory of a poker hand?
8. On the trail, what person generally wakes up the sleeping cowpunchers in the morning?
9. What is a "skookum house," and where in the West would you expect to find one?
10. Of what use is the "best mare" to a cowpuncher? Why is the animal so named?
11. For whom was Pike's Peak named, and in what state is this famous rock-mass located?
12. The western saddle known as the "California rig" has: One cinch? Two cinches? Three cinches?
13. What is a "tapadero"?
14. "Side-lining" is a term used in connection with: Hobbling horses? A cattleman who deals in sheep as a side line? An employee who sells his employer's livestock to dishonest cattle dealers . . . on the side?
15. True or false? Colts are seldom if ever born pure white.
16. What is a nester?
17. Who was the well-known Westerner known as "Sam Bass"?
18. In cowpuncher slang, what is a "goose drownder"?
19. A "hogskin" is: An English saddle? A Mexican cowboy? A type of water jug?
20. What is the meaning of the cowpuncher slang term, "eyeballer"?

(Answers on page 65)

TALES of the

by LEE

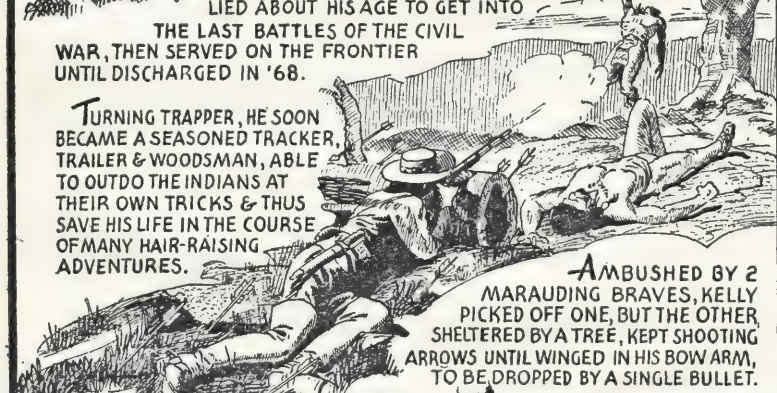
LUTHER "YELLOWSTONE" KELLY



LUTHER KELLY, SOLDIER IN 4 WARS, EXPLORER & ONE OF THE GREATEST INDIAN SCOUTS OF THE OLD WEST, WAS KNOWN TO INDIAN FRIEND & FOE ALIKE AS "THE MAN WITH THE STRONGEST MEDICINE WHO NEVER LAYS DOWN HIS GUNS."

BORN IN GENEVA, N. Y., IN 1849, HE LIED ABOUT HIS AGE TO GET INTO THE LAST BATTLES OF THE CIVIL WAR, THEN SERVED ON THE FRONTIER UNTIL DISCHARGED IN '68.

TURNING TRAPPER, HE SOON BECAME A SEASONED TRACKER, TRAILER & WOODSMAN, ABLE TO OUTDO THE INDIANS AT THEIR OWN TRICKS & THUS SAVE HIS LIFE IN THE COURSE OF MANY HAIR-RAISING ADVENTURES.



AMBUSHED BY 2 MARAUDING BRAVES, KELLY PICKED OFF ONE, BUT THE OTHER SHELTERED BY A TREE, KEPT SHOOTING ARROWS UNTIL WINGED IN HIS BOW ARM, TO BE DROPPED BY A SINGLE BULLET.

LEAVING FORT BUFORD, KELLY AND ED LAMBERT, BY FOOT AND BULL BOAT OF BUFFALO HIDE, EXPLORED THE HITHERTO UNTRODDEN YELLOWSTONE TERRITORY. HIS TALES OF THE HOSTILE REGION EARNED HIM THE NICKNAME OF "YELLOWSTONE."



OLD WEST

BEN NELSON



AS SCOUT FOR GENERAL MILES IN '78 KELLY & HIS DETACHMENT WERE CHASED BY THE SITTING BULL'S SAVAGE SIOUX. ELUDING THEM IN THE SMOKE OF A PRAIRIE FIRE THEY WERE MISTAKEN FOR INDIANS & SHOT AT UNTIL "YELLOWSTONE" CRAWLED FROM THEIR SHELTER IN A DRY RIVER BED & NOTIFIED AN OFFICER OF THE MISTAKE.

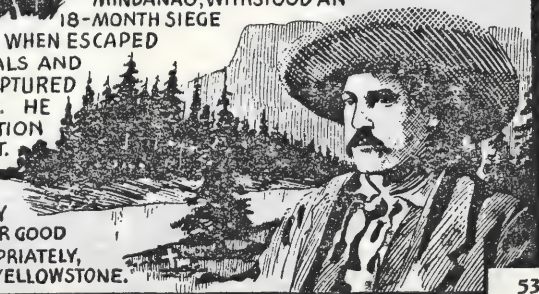
ONCE IN UTE COUNTRY HE STUMBLED INTO A CAMP OF HOSTILES AND WAS TAKEN. HE TOLD THEM HE HAD COME IN PEACE, GLANCED AT HIS WATCH, WHEELED HIS HORSE & BOLDLY RODE AWAY--MUCH TO THEIR ASTONISHMENT.



DURING THE PHILIPPINE INSURRECTION, CAP. KELLY THEN ACTING GOVERNOR OF MINDANAO, WITHSTOOD AN 18-MONTH SIEGE WHEN ESCAPED

CRIMINALS AND BANDITS CAPTURED THE PRINCIPAL TOWN. HE WON THE COMMENDATION OF TEDDY ROOSEVELT.

THE 80-YEAR-OLD CAMPAIGNER FINALLY LAID DOWN HIS GUNS FOR GOOD & WAS BURIED, APPROPRIATELY, ON THE BANKS OF THE YELLOWSTONE.



GUN PROUD



The Mexican ruffian tensed and then hurled himself clear of the girl.

By
AL STORM

DEPUTY TRIP DALEY shoved cartridges into his 45-90 with a troubled light in the wrinkle-mesh pockets of his hard blue eyes. Two .45's lay on the spurscarred desk before him, and apprehension bowed the wide, strong sweep of his shoulders.

"Slug Spiven ain't forgot what that single-tree you felled him with did to his pretty face," old Sam Baugh, the Cochise County sheriff, warned grimly as he checked over his own shooting gear. "He was as braggin'-

proud of his good looks as he was of his dead-shot shootin'."

The sheriff paused and shot a keen glance of furtive inquiry toward the silent deputy; then he went on gravely, "Nor was he just shaking his rattles making those threats in court. He's showed that by shooting his way out of Territory Prison at Yuma."

Trip Daley frowned and his tobacco-stained fingers toyed mechanically with the cedar butts of the two Peacemakers on the desk.

"If they get me, it's the rope or the Gray Death. I'd go crazy watching it creep over me. I won't be taken alive—I'll fight until they cut me down!"

For a brief moment his glance left the grizzled features of his lawman boss and skipped across the dazzling dust of Huachuca's only street toward the adobe beanyery where Dona Florez dished out the best pies north of old Sonora. Slug Spiven couldn't make Daley afraid for himself, but . . .

Hiding his concern for his pretty sweetheart from the beetle-browed old lawman, Trip mustered a grin. "Well, Slug Spiven can't fly, and Yuma is—"

A frenzied tattoo of flying hoofs sent its urgency into the small law office and cut him off. Both lawmen leaped toward the door in time to see a foam-spattered horse thunder into town from the north trail.

"Here it comes," old Baugh grunted resignedly. "That's Bill Erickson, one of the jury that sentenced Slug Spiven to life."

The dun slithered to a braced-legged halt in front of the jailhouse. An old frontier veteran reeled across the board walk.

"Spiven—he's back!" the old rancher croaked. "Caught me in Bonita canyon—was going to drag me behind his cayuse. I—I made a break and managed to get clear."

The old-timer stopped and shuddered. "His face is chopped up like mud around a water hole . . . and Yuma made him a lunger! But he's still quicker'n a sidewinder with his belt-gun, and he's gunnin' for your scalp, special, Trip," the oldster warned. "Raved about what you'd look like when he got done with your face."

The deputy felt his long lips twist in a mirthless grimace as he met the knowing look from the sheriff. The grease-stained doekin jacket grew tight across his slab shoulders as he jerked up the Winchester and levered a cartridge into the firing chamber. Slug Spiven was a killer hombre who never missed a shot, but if Slug Spiven never got in the first shot— Looking up, the deputy found old Sam Baugh watching him.

The sheriff suddenly flicked the long gun out of the deputy's hands. "I'm taking a posse toward Sugar Loaf mountain," Baugh said. "You're staying in town and watching out for Skid Summers and Phil Devers and the rest of that jury that popped it to Slug Spiven."

The outraged deputy raised a squawk that was cut short.

"Hold Bill Erickson here for safety. And keep him off the streets!"

TRIP DALEY growled at old Erickson to stay under cover and stepped out to warn the other jury members. He jerked his eyes away from the dust whirls still hanging over the north trail where the posse had plunged into the mountains without him.

Dona Florez came to the door of her little adobe cafe and stood watching him, but Trip Daley kept raising little dust puffs with his hard-hitting boots. He didn't want to talk to her just yet. Sight of her red lips bunched uneasily and the morose shadow that haunted her pretty Spanish eyes sent a thread of hate for the killer ripping through him. She knew, just as all the border knew. Word of Slug Spiven's jail-break had been like a rattler's warning, freezing the border country.

The edge of Trip Daley's vision showed her anxious frown lifting toward the boulder-studded Chiricahua mountain slopes that hemmed the town. A dead-shot rifleman could lie in ambush and kill a man from back there in the manzanita chaparral. It was his hope that Slug Spiven would betray his presence with just such a shot.

But none came, and the long-geared deputy tromped across the walk and into Phil Dever's General Store over which Dona Florez had two rooms. The bushy-whiskered storeman took one look at the deputy's set face and gestured toward the sawed-off shotgun laid conveniently across the counter.

"I reckon I know what you're aimin' to say, Trip," the storeman said. "I'll keep away from my windows as much as possible until that killer's either dead or driven north. Maybe the Apaches'll get him," Devers added hopefully.

Trip shook his head. "Not much chance."

A hoarse shout rang through the baking heat of Huachuca's street. Hard on the echo came a sudden smash of gunfire. A woman screamed piercingly. Before the sound had died, Trip Daley was out the door.

A figure lay prostrate in the dust fronting the jailhouse. A swift glance showed the deputy that it was old Bill Erickson. At the same time he saw the scar-faced Mexican renegade struggling with Dona Florez in the doorway of her cafe. Bright sunlight flashed from the butcher knife she was trying to wield to defend herself, but the outlaw had her arms pinned and was pulling her out the door and toward a paint pony ground-anchored a few yards away.

"Drop her, Spic!" Trip grated harshly. "Let Slug Spiven do his own wife-stealing!"

The Mexican ruffian tensed and then hurled himself clear of the girl. His brown hand laced downward toward the pistol sagging at his hip.

Trip Daley felt the goading of hate spur him ruthlessly. The heavy Peacemakers rose in a blur to his fingers and bit into the sunlight with sharp spikes of blue-red flame. The Mex broke at the waist with a shrill scream and fell groveling in the road dust. Dona Florez let the butcher knife fall from her limp fingers as she watched, wide-eyed.

Trip Daley stalked forward, his six-guns fanged back and poised.

"It's the end of the trail, Spic," Trip Daley said slowly. "Clean your slate and you'll go easier. Where's Slug Spiven holeing up?"

Ashen-faced, Spic glared at the deputy.

"You'll know when he rides in," the outlaw snarled weakly. "He let old Baugh lead the posse away so that he could settle with you personally. When he comes—he—" A scream rose in the dying renegade's throat and whistled through his clenched teeth.

Bony fingers fumbled in the ragged shirt, and Trip Daley lunged to one side. But the bullet wasn't for him, and the Mexican outlaw shuddered and grew limp, a smoking derringer dropping from his lifeless fingers. However Spic Morales had planned to use the derringer, pain had finally decided for him.

The handful of men left in Huachuca came running up. They gathered around the figure of the outlaw and around Bill Erickson.

"Mr. Erickson died to save me," Dona Florez wept unashamedly. "He saw this man trying to kidnap me. He tried to help me and—was shot."

Trip Daley patted her shoulder awkwardly and led her back inside the little cafe. At the door he turned. Both dead men were being carried down the street, but blood lay in dark pools, sign that Slug Spiven was again riding the Chiricahuas, summoning his wolf pack of border killers.

The deputy stared at the ragged mountains, at the bald leering rock of Cochise Head far to the right. Given enough killers, Slug Spiven would wipe Huachuca out of existence. All that blocked his blood-lust was the gun-odds favoring the little town. But twenty men—fifteen or a dozen now—and he could strike before the posse returned. It would be the revenge Slug Spiven craved.

"I've got to get word to that posse." The deputy suddenly turned to the few townsmen watching him. "Two of the best riders hit out north and bring the sheriff back. Huachuca may not be here when you get back unless you hurry. Make that plain to Sam Baugh if he argues. Tell him Slug Spiven's between him and town!"

Men raced for the livery barn. While Trip Daley watched, two men spurred past him in a rising cloud of dust and tore down the north trail, twisting out of sight in a matter of minutes.

Silence settled across the heat-baked town and grew stifling and tensed.

Trip Daley turned and legged it for the livery barn and his own flashy black mount. Back in front of the adobe cafe, the lawman dismounted long enough to pick out the tracks made by the Mex outlaw's horse. The tracks

led around the cafe and up the slight slope into the manzanita. The outlaw evidently hadn't bothered to hide his trail.

It was slow, painstaking work, and precious time drained steadily away as the engrossed deputy searched out each rock scratch or broken twig that pointed the way. But there was one chance in a thousand that the back-track would lead to Slug Spiven's lair. And another one chance in a thousand that the deputy could beef the torn-faced killer before he was himself cut down by outlaw lead.

But as the sun rose to stand high overhead, Trip Daley mopped the sweat from his face and knew that he had lost. Ahead and below stretched the fantastic Heart-of-Rocks country, a mad jungle of eroded rock spires and jagged pilings that reared high and sharp from the mated brush growth, white and bald yellow against the sullen dusty green. Spic Morales' trail had petered out over half a mile back, and the deputy couldn't find even a shoe-scratch on the lava fields.

THEN a faint sound snagged his vigilance, and he stiffened in careful listening. The sound came again. The low, heavy *pow wow* of rifle fire. For a moment the shifting air currents that carried the sounds confused him, and he started to ride one way, only to rein and try another direction as the vibrant sound came again. Then, playing a hunch, he spurred the sweat-gleaming black for the old stage road that wound through the mountains. It was nearly stage time; and the killer outlaw just fresh from two years at Yuma might think Trip Daley still rode the line.

Threading through clawing chaparral and whipping around jagged spires of rock, the game black climbed a torturous twisting canyon bed. The Heart-of-Rocks fell behind. A long, boulder-pimpled slope opened ahead, crossed a ridge and sagged down toward the winding gray ribbon of stage road. And trouble!

Down there, the stage was standing motionless. Two of the four horses were down, the deputy saw clearly. Near the nigh front wheel stood a man. That the two men on the Concord roof were dead there was no question.

Cold with fury, one heavy Peacemaker in his hand, Trip Daley charged down the slope. The man beside the stage whipped about for a startled look up to where the lawman wheeled his flashy black around the boulders and scrub brush. Then the hombre ducked under the stage body. The standing horses reared and snorted until they, too, tangled in the harness and went down.

Lead ate a hole past Trip's head. The lawman sent a snarling wad of death toward the outlaw who was shooting from cover of the

stranded stage coach. Trip felt the Peacemaker buck against his hand. Then the sombrero was jerked from his head and sent winging. Cold flooded his shoulders and ran icy fingers across his scalp as he heard the slam of a rifle firing at him. Hot wind burned across the bridge of his nose so close it made his eyes water.

Trip Daley struck spurs to the running black and darted straight toward the stalled stage. He wouldn't have a chance against the unseen rifleman, but he might get in a shot or two before hot lead ate through him. And the stage outlaw must have figured the same way, for he suddenly cut loose with a frantic salvo of six-gun slugs that combed the air around the deputy's hard-riding body.

The range closed swiftly beneath the black's churning hooves. Trip curved around the stage, slamming quick hot slugs at the gunny who was trying to reload and roll under the Concord body all at the same time. The gunman faltered and Trip gave him a rolling blast that chopped him to pieces.

The thunderous blasts suddenly faded as the deputy felt something hot pour down the side of his jaws. The mountains swirled crazily before his blood-hazed eyes. A black haze billowed to cover everything, and he seemed to float away from the saddle. . . .

Trip Daley heard, rather than felt, the savage blow that dug into his side. His head ached and thirst clogged his throat. The thud came into his ribs again, and a ribbon of dull pain stretched feelers through his side.

"He got the Tonto Kid," a hoarse voice grated above the pound of his pulse. "Damned lawdog!" Again the boot lashed a brutal kick into the fallen deputy's body. "Wish I'd a put that rifle slug through his guts instead of through his head."

A great weight compressed the lawman's chest until he could barely force a trickle of air into his lungs. He hadn't the strength to move a finger. Limp and unresisting, his body rolled like dead under the outlaw's savagely pummeling boots.

"So you killed Trip Daley against my orders?" The cold sibilant whisper seemed to cut the air and Daley could feel his assailant stiffen. "You knew I had plans for settling with him personally!"

Even with his lids clamped tight, Trip Daley felt the speaker's venom creep into his blood, freezing him motionless with a strange, unholly horror.

"How'd I know Trip Daley was wearin' a lawman badge?" the hoarse voice snarled. "He shot the Tonto Kid to ribbons under the stage coach."

Then suddenly the hoarse voice raised to a shrill squawk that was cut short by a ripping blast of gunfire.

The deputy steeled himself not to jerk his eyes open. His pulse raced as he listened in darkness to the sodden thunk of a body hitting the dry stone-dust of the stage road. After that there was silence, ominous and charged with death.

The whisper challenged wickedly: "Any you would-be tough boys got any objections?"

A sullen chorus grunted in the negative.

"You sure that Daley is dead?" the whisper purred. "Nothing more we can do to him?"

"Hell, Butch took him dead center through the noggin with his long gun," someone said. "He ain't standin' up under that!"

"Then dig spurs for Huachuca!" the dry whisper spat.

"That posse won't stay out a week. And get this! Phil Devers and Skid Summers are mine. You can shoot and burn out the rest of the town. But I lay claim to those two rannihans and that Florez spitfire who thinks she's too good to marry Slug Spiven."

Hoofs spattered grit across the lawman's unprotected face as the outlaws wheeled to spur off.

Trip Daley pressed his arms hard against the hot road as he fought down a mad impulse to rise up and rave at the departing killer. But he knew that such a move would be worse than suicide. Slug Spiven would like nothing better than settling with the lawman slowly and painfully before making his raid on Huachuca.

SLOWLY the last hint of sound drained from the baking hot air. Trip opened his eyes a mere slit and stared around. The stage still stood, grotesque with the dead men on the roof and the dead Tonto Kid sprawled beside the hind wheel. And a bare ten feet from Trip's outstretched hand lay the outlaw Slug Spiven had murdered with five bullets a peso could cover.

The lawman laboriously dragged himself to his hands and knees while the Chiricahua peaks reeled and surged. The ragged furrow above his left ear began seeping warm again, and weakness grabbed at his knees and shook him. But he managed to get to his feet and stagger over to the stage where he rested, shoulders braced against the shot-torn panels. There was no sign of the black nor of the dead outlaws' horses. One of the stage horses was still struggling in a tangled welter of harness straps and tugs.

After seeming hours of fumbling and weak hacking with his pocket knife, the still dazed deputy managed to free the animal. One Peacemaker six-gun still rested in its holster at his bruised side, the other lay in the road half a dozen yards away where it had dropped from his hand. Trip Daley retrieved it and clambered onto the stage horse.

The animal jogged along stiffly, reluctantly settling into a laborious run under Trip Daley's belaboring. The road twisted and snaked through the Chiricahua wilds, but the deputy did not dare take the awkward team horse through the rugged canyons that slanted off in a more direct line toward the town. Even if the horse could make it, he doubted that he would have the strength to cling to the harness.

The sun sloped downward and threw long shadows of hot, blue velvet into the canyons and fissures of the rock slopes. For the twentieth time, Trip Daley looked to his six-guns. And for the hundredth time he scanned the road ahead for some sign that he was overtaking the vengeance-crazed outlaw killer.

Then he was closer to Huachuca, and the sun poised like a fire-globe on the western rim of crimson lava upthrusts. The heavy-boned horse weaved and strained under the grueling pace, but Trip Daley was beyond consideration of either mount or himself. His ears taunted him with the dry whisper of Slug Spiven's bragging determination to kidnap Dona Florez.

The very silence of the canyons was ominous, such a silence as would bank around a dead town. Only the absence of roiling black smoke heartened him, for when Slug Spiven struck Huachuca he would turn it into a raging inferno, roasting the townsmen in the hot ashes of their own homes and stores.

Then a faint crisp cackle of gunfire echoed thinly along the canyon road. The sound sent a shiver of anxiety down the lean deputy's spine. Slug Spiven had hit the town with his border cutthroats, but Huachuca was making a fight of it. A dim ray of hope flickered for a moment. Maybe Sam Baugh had returned with the posse, but then he knew that Sam's posse would be spitting rifle fire. Six-guns were steadily chanting their deadly little tunes alone.

The road swung wide around a manzanita-choked mountain shoulder and then angled down through the one street of Huachuca. To use that road would be to invite death from any of a dozen outlaw guns. Daley sawed on the reins and sent his faltering mount plunging through the chaparral. Twisting and turning, they threaded their way while the thickening night spread loud and angry with gunfire.

Then suddenly Trip Daley found an opening and raced for the besieged little town. He cut sharply to the left at the spiny ridge just back of Dona Florez's cafe and lit running, his boot heels digging against the rock and sand underfoot.

Slivers of flame spiked out from the adobe walls of Skid Summer's thick walled saloon down the street. Other gun flames gushed red

from the dark blur of the stage barns and from the great whitish shape of the livery barn beside them. Trip eared back the fangs of both Peacemakers with a savage flick of his thumbs. He edged along the shadows that hung in deep pools of black across the rear of Dona Florez's little adobe building.

Slipping stealthily around the side of the building, the deputy found the front door swinging loose on shattered hinges. For a moment his breathing stopped sickeningly. If Slug Spiven had made good his threat to steal Dona Florez. . . .

"Quien es?"

The deputy froze against the earthen wall as the soft query speared the night. He inched backward slowly, sifting the darkness for some sign of the Mexican speaker, who could only be one of Slug Spiven's dim-trail riders. The lawman's side brushed the adobe wall and the slithering sound rang loud in the silence of the darkened town. Trip hurled himself violently to one side. Even as he moved, a long gash of flame split the darkness. Lead slammed into the adobe beside him. His Peacemaker hammered quick reply, and the deputy heard the renegade gasp and go down in the darkness of the unlighted street.

A man yelled and unseen boot heels rapped across a distant board walk. Trip Daley faded back into the night behind the cafe and cat-footed along the alley toward Phil Devers' General Store.

A lone six-gun barked from Skid Summer's saloon, sending sharp echoes jerking from rock slope to rock slope. Guns snarled all up and down the dark street, centering a hail of lead on the saloon where Huachuca townsmen still resisted the outlaws. A few Huachuca fighters holed up in the stage barns tried to draw some of the renegade fire by sniping at the muzzle flames of the outlaw guns.

Then the white-speckled Arizona sky overhead was suddenly blotted out by the dark bulk of the General Store. Noiselessly, the deputy moved toward it, feeling his way through the blackness before he moved one boot before the other. His outstretched right hand touched the warm wood of the outside stairway that led to the rooms upstairs.

The lawman tensed as a fresh crescendo of shots raged through the night breeze. The sound brought a grim smile to his twisted lips. He started up the outside stairway.

THE stairs moved and sounded with the solid rap of boots, and two men came out the top door and started down, blocking black and solid against the lighter gloom of the night sky. At the same split instant, a rifle slammed a throbbing wedge of noise the length of the street. The startled silence that followed grew ragged and charged

with waiting. Then a second rifle barked; a third—a fourth. The sound ran around the far side of the town, blocked the lower canyon road, and then ran back up through the manzanita of the near side.

"That's Sam Baugh's posse with a rifle ring around this town!" a man yelled from the top of the stairway. "We got to ride or get cut down like cornered coyotes."

Simultaneously, a snarling bedlam of shots shook the town. The Huachuca fighters trapped in Skid Summers' saloon had rushed out and were pouring a lethal hail of lead along the dark, thunderous street. And Slug Spiven's gun crew put their backs to the wall and traded slug for slug and muzzle flash for muzzle flash. Unable to distinguish between the powder flare of friend and foe, Sam Baugh's posse came riding in slowly, tightening the steel ring with slow, grim determination.

Trip Daley hit the steps three at a time, plunged through the door and into a short dark hallway. Faint streaks of light showed under Dona Florez's door. His bunched shoulders hit the door like a granite boulder, and he flung on into the room. He saw only Dona Florez, who blanched at his grim, blood-stained face and poised six-guns.

The deputy grasped her by the shoulders. "Easy," he murmured, shaking with relief that she was still here. "Easy. I'm not dying. And that shooting you hear is Sam Baugh's posse cleaning things up."

For a fraction of a second she remained limp in his arms, then she thrust him roughly away. "Let me go, you fool!"

Grating and jagged as broken glass, a dry whispery voice repeated her words: "Let her go!"

Trip Daley froze, his eyes swinging slowly to bear on the doorway leading to Dona Florez's kitchen. Slug Spiven stood there, pale and thin, staring at the lawman with twisted lips and hot eyes. Dona Florez smiled toward him and moved away from the lawman.

Trip Daley felt his bone marrow creep as he watched her. Sickened with doubt, the deputy raised his hands shoulder high. He cursed himself for not having made certain that Dona Florez was alone before holstering his guns. And Dona Florez . . . smiling at this border scum . . .

Slug Spiven stepped into the room and sidled along the wall. Bleached and drawn fingers gripped a heavy Colt's .45 pistol. From eyebrows to grotesque chin, the killer's face was a scarred horror of warped flesh and twisted muscle. Snarling, the outlaw jabbed his gun forward.

"You—you're not going to shoot . . ." Dona Florez's voice bubbled in her throat.

"Go ahead and scream, baby," Slug Spiven

jeered. "You won't live to hear it echo—either of you."

"I wasn't going to scream," Dona Florez said shakily. "But if you shoot, you'll warn Sam Baugh. . . ."

Trip Daley felt the hard, set mask of his face sting as he realized the fear beneath Dona's voice.

"I'll take that chance," the outlaw snarled. "You didn't think I'd let him get away, did you?" Slug Spiven's voice rose and shrilled with madness. "I'm just wondering which end of his face to shoot off first!"

"You'd rather have that revenge—than marry me?" Dona Florez laughed as she straightened and swayed toward the snarling, froth-lipped outlaw. "Leave this lawhound here for the town to laugh at. He's shown me a good time, but your side of the fence flashes the most gold."

"If they get me it's the rope," Slug Spiven said harshly. "They'd take me back to Yuma. It's the Gray Death, and I'd go crazy watching it creep over me. I won't face it. I won't be taken alive. I'll fight 'till they cut me down."

Dona Florez took his arm. "I know. I'll take that chance with you. I can handle a rifle. But we've got to sneak out of here quick, before Sam Baugh gets here."

Slug Spiven looked at her for one split second, a wild triumph flickering across his twisted features. Then the expression was gone and with a sudden savage sweep of his arm, Slug Spiven sent her sprawling across the room. She struck the wall and huddled there, wide eyes staring with cold horror at the killer. Trip Daley flexed his fingers and his hand shot beltward. The killer sensed the move and whirled back to face him. Then Trip Daley felt the Peacemakers *splat* against his palms, felt them rear and stab forward.

Slug Spiven grinned a twisted, mirthless grin and shoved his own six-gun toward the deputy. It flamed, a split second after Trip Daley felt his own Peacemakers jar his wrists again and again in bellowing thunder. It was over. Slug Spiven lay like a crumpled rag, a crimson thread growing and spreading under him.

With a dry sob, Dona Florez flung herself into the lawman's arms, hugging and snuffling and babbling through her tears.

"I had to do it. I had to do it," she cried. "I wanted him to take me and leave you alone. I was so afraid he'd . . ."

Trip Daley nodded. Boots were pounding the outside stairway, and Sam Baugh's gruff voice shouted orders at the ascending possemen.

"I understood," the deputy said softly, holding her close. "But we're getting married right away before you get a chance to scare me trying to save my life again."

The Way of the Long Riders

Helmut was a man with a slow mind, and the tongue of America came slowly to him. But there was no need for speech when night-rider guns declared war on the land he loved!

The stump-bar rose in a pendulum-like swing.



By
**RAY
P.**

SHOTWELL



HELMUT came out of the barn, walking stiffly. The bare and drafty floor of the loft was not a good place to sleep; he shrugged his shoulders philosophicaly. He had not slept well for many nights, but his troubles were as nothing compared to those of the Beamans.

He started up toward the house, his eyes sweeping the familiar yard. He did not understand this country—or its people. This was a good farm; the buildings were put together

solidly. The roofs had good pitch and well laid shakes. Fence rails were honestly split, rigidly lined. The ground was painstakingly cleared of stone and stump. Hal Beaman had done these things with his hands, with the earnest care of a good workman. This was a credit to the country, something of which neighbors could be proud; but they were not. It seemed almost as though the neighbors hated the even furrows of turned red earth and the neat rails of fencing.

It puzzled Helmut. He remembered his own coming to this place. He had been sick and footsore and weary, beaten down by the vastness of these great grasslands which dwarfed the steep Scandinavian hills still green in his memory. He remembered Hal Beaman's plow-stooped figure in the doorway of the neat little house and Beaman's question to him.

"Where are you bound, neighbor?"

Helmut was a man with a slow mind and the tongue of America came slowly to him. After five years he still spoke no more than there was need. Before he answered Beaman, he thought of the green farm country he had heard lay where big timber grew, somewhere beyond these plains of dun grass. Helmut did not like the grass. A man could not till it with his hands. Weaving on his feet, his huge body long empty of food and shaken with fever, he had spoken the name of the green country of farms.

"Oregon."

Beaman had looked astonished. "Oregon—a foot?"

"I have no horse."

Beaman's voice had gentled. "Come in, friend," he had invited. "This is only Wyoming. You won't get to Oregon by tomorrow. And you look done in."

Weeks had passed. Mary Beaman, amid her housewife's labors, had tended the huge, ailing stranger as though he were a brother. Her children came often to his bed to ask after his wants. Bob and little Mary. Helmut was penniless and could not pay the Beamans; he stayed, instead, content with this farmer's place.

And there came to be more than just a debt between the Beamans and himself. Not since he had left the homeland had Helmut owned a friend. He had found four here, and farm land to till.

Now the peace was gone. Hal Beaman lay in the house with a rifle bullet through his back. The milk cows were gone from the barn. The carcasses of the plow team were lying bloated in the field where Hal Beaman would have planted grain. Mary Beaman's storehouse had been looted and the food trampled into the earth of the yard.

The good was destroyed. How could a man understand it?

HELMUT spat and scraped his feet on the mud-knife nailed to the back steps of the little house. Mary Beaman was in the kitchen. She came to the door.

"How do you feel, Helmut?" she asked.

Mary Beaman was a pretty woman. And she was brave, asking about the health of another when her husband lay close to death. Helmut raised his hand to his head. He had forgotten the split and angry welt there, a welt raised by the clubbed gun—he shrugged a little.

"Your husband—?"

Mary Beaman's pallid face turned more white. She leaned heavily with both hands against the jambs of the doorway. Helmut saw she was not so much a woman now as a frightened child. She shook her head.

"I don't know. The doctor wouldn't come." Subconsciously she used words he himself might have used. "Why should a doctor be afraid of hooded ruffians, Helmut? A doctor has no fields, no fences, no plows. He has no children to feed from his furrows. Is it that he hates us, too?"

Helmut spoke stolidly.

"Maybe this one is more a coward than a doctor!" he said.

Mary Beaman stepped back in the doorway and Helmut went on into the kitchen. It had been a neat place. It was nearly so again. Hal Beaman's wife had fought her grief as farmers fight all things—with toil. She had not been able to repair cupboard doors ripped from their hinges or great, careless rowel marks gouged into the clean planking of her floor. But the messy ruin the raiders had left behind them had been cleared away.

The two children sat hunched in chairs at either side of the kitchen table and terror was livid in their eyes.

"You are afraid?" Helmut asked Bob.

The boy nodded, swallowing nervously.

"What of?"

"The men—"

"They hurt my daddy!" the little girl suddenly wailed.

Helmut nodded at the children as though this were some small problem he could help them solve; a problem no more difficult for his big hands than a broken wooden doll or a knife without a handle. A kind of hope glimmered in the two small pairs of eyes; an abiding faith. Helmut saw and felt this and grew more gentle. He stood up, smiling quietly.

"It is not good to be afraid of cowards," he said. "It is not good to be afraid at all. When a coyote yaps near the chicken pens, what does a farmer do?"

Bob brightened. "Scare him," he said surely. "Scare him bad."

Helmut nodded. "That is true. So we scare the coyotes in the sacks, eh?"

"You, Helmut—you'll scare 'em?" the boy asked, wonderingly.

"Scare 'em plenty bad, Helmut!" little Mary urged fiercely.

Helmut started for the door. Mary Beaman followed him out onto the steps.

"Thank you, Helmut!" she said softly. "Thank you for wanting to do that! But you can't go into town. I need you here. We've got to get out. There'll be more trouble if we don't. I can't move Hal and the children alone. I need you terribly!"

Helmut shook his head slowly and ponderously.

"Yes. But I do not think of you and what you need. I think of the children. It's not good for children to be afraid!"

"Helmut, you can't—"

He moved on into the yard. Mary Beaman knew the riders would not come back until her husband were either well or dead of his wound. She knew she could not move Hal with that wound in his back. Helmut could be of no help to her, now. The damage was done.

Helmut went to the barn. A man on a grim errand had need of a weapon. But only a fool would hang his life on a weapon unfamiliar to his hands. Hal Beaman had good guns in the house—but Helmut took a stump-bar from the barn—a six-foot shaft of steel with a spade bit at each end.

LA GRANGE lay at the head of the little valley which also held the Beaman farm.

It needed but green fields and farmers' houses about it to make it a pleasant town. Its street was straight and lined with trees. Its buildings were solid and well spaced. Helmut stopped at the upper end of the street. Slow at thinking he might be, but he was not a fool—

Helmut moved toward the center of town, using the stump-bar as an old man uses a staff, the steel seeming as light as a cane in his broad-fingered grip.

Sam Aiken was sitting in a big wicker chair on the porch of his store. Sam was fundamentally a friendly man, but he had a trader's slyness, and he knew most of his trade came from the big ranchers.

He scowled and hailed Helmut. "Hey, Swede, come over here!"

Helmut bent his course obediently. It was a funny thing. In the old country a man was a Swede or a Dane or a Norseman or a Finn and was proud of it, but in America he was only a Swede.

He stopped at the foot of the steps in front of Sam Aiken.

"Is Beaman dead yet?"

Helmut shook his head. "I don't know. But I am not dead!"

Aiken scowled.

"Don't be a fool. I was thinking about the woman and her kids. The boys went a little wild. You can't do anything. You better clear out of the country. But wait till night. Keep out of sight. I'll have a box of stuff to eat sitting by my back door after supper. Get it out to them—then keep on going!"

"That is kind," Helmut answered. "They are nice kids. And that is a good woman. I take the box back tonight. But now I have business!"

Aiken shrugged irritably. "They'll crucify you," he said. "They've tasted blood and haven't washed the taste out with whiskey yet!"

"They are at the saloon?"

"How the hell do I know where they are?" Aiken snapped. "Find them yourself! And move on. I don't want anybody wondering what the devil I was talking to you about!"

Helmut turned back into the street. Far down, where the saloon sat apart, he saw many horses at the rails and a little knot of men on the walk, looking curiously up the length of the track toward him. He moved unhurriedly. When he came abreast a small, neat building which advertised the office of Doctor Martin over its door, he turned in. A thin, nervous woman came hurriedly into the outer room.

"You're looking for the doctor?" she asked.

Helmut nodded.

"He isn't in. I don't know where he is—he's not seeing patients today!"

Helmut sank into a stiff chair. "I will wait."

Fear flicked in the thin woman's eyes. "You're a friend of the Beaman's, aren't you?"

Helmut nodded.

"You mustn't hold it against the doctor!" the woman said swiftly. "You mustn't. Those men are mad—crazy. The doctor would have ridden down the valley to Beaman's, but I wouldn't let him go. I fought with him. They would have killed him if he went."

"They—" Helmut said.

"Bert Totten and Dave Spence—others—how do I know who they all are?"

Helmut stood up and moved to the door. "I will be back. Tell the doctor he should be ready!" he said.

He stepped out into the street. A group of three men broke away from the knot down by the saloon and moved swiftly up to meet him. Helmut was aware of doors closing about him, of the street emptying at his back. His fingers wrapped more snugly about the haft of the stump-bar and he paced on steadily until the three fanned out across the walk in front of him, barring his way.

He knew them all. One was a rider for Spence. The other two were Bert Totten's

men. The Spence man said nothing. One Totten rider fingered the butt of his gun. The other thrust his face almost into Helmut's own.

"Listen, farmer!" the man rasped. "You've had your lesson. You've got ten minutes to get out of town or you'll go out in a pine box!"

Helmut said quietly, "Get out of the way."

The Totten man grinned tightly and spat. Helmut's shoulders moved. The stump-bar made a pendulous-like swing. The bit on its lower end rapped across two pairs of shins. The Totten riders doubled. One freed his gun. But Helmut had dropped the bar and, as the weapon came up, his hard, square fist rammed into the man's face.

It lasted thirty seconds. Bert Totten's riders were sprawled limp on the walk, mauled to senselessness by the swift fury of Helmut's stroking arms.

The Spence rider stood back, looking at his two companions.

Helmut asked him, "You have something to say?"

The man raised dazed eyes to Helmut's face. A strange look was in them, half wonder and half something else. It could have been grudging respect. He shook his head and stepped back off the walk.

"No."

HELMUT picked up the stump-bar and moved on. The sheriff's deputy for La Grange, a blustering man named McCann, came out of the hotel directly ahead. Helmut's grip on the bar tightened, but the deputy did not turn toward the fallen men on the walk. He barely looked in their direction, then turned on his heel and walked briskly away.

Helmut followed at a slower pace. When McCann came opposite the growing knot in front of the saloon, somebody shouted to him. The deputy answered with an angry denial and continued on toward the shack which constituted the office of the law in the town.

The knot in front of the saloon broke up after this and melted through the batwings, leaving only two men on the walk. Helmut angled across the street. Bert Totten was one

of the two waiting men. He turned back suddenly, doubling through the doors. Only Dave Spence was on the walk when Helmut reached the front of the saloon.

"You looking for trouble, Swede?" the rancher asked. Helmut shook his head.

"No, only for cowards!"

Spence colored. He seemed to think of something, then he stepped close to Helmut.

"That was a bad thing," he said in a softened voice. "Go on back. I raised hell with Bert and what boys of mine rode with him. I'll try to keep it from happening again. And I've got two fresh cows at my place. You'll find 'em in Beaman's upper pasture tomorrow morning—"

"That is not enough!"

Spence spread his hands with angry helplessness. "I can't bring dead men alive!"

"Beaman is not dead. I'll go back soon—with the doctor, and he will live. You are afraid. But you did not ride with the others. I have no business with you."

Helmut started toward the batwings. Spence caught his arm.

"There's been enough blood over one lousy little section of plowed ground. Get the doctor and go on home. Tell Beaman to keep his nose clean. He may get prodded again—I can't stop that. But he won't be hurt. If you go in there, you'll be gut-shot before you've taken two steps. Bert's got some ringy boys!"

Helmut pulled away. "It is not good to be afraid!" he said doggedly. "A farmer cannot work his ground if he is afraid. And he does not like prodding!"

Helmut gripped the stump-bar near its end with a hold known long before a ship ever touched the rocky, timber-fringed eastern shores of this America. His broad, square back straightened and his muscles tensed. He banged one knee against the swinging doors; then plowed like a hurricane into the silent, waiting saloon.

Dave Spence had been right. Totten and the reckless wolves with him were waiting, ready. Guns slammed. One slug touched Helmut. He felt the tug of it, but there was no hurt. And then he was across the open between Totten's crew and the door. He was close enough.

We are always glad to cooperate with the government in supporting the war effort—and now the government desires to conserve paper. FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES Magazine is pleased to announce that in complying with the new plans, it has been possible to adjust the type size in such a way as to give the readers in the fewer pages even more wordage than before. You can do your part, too, by salvaging waste paper.

A thirty-pound shaft of steel rose and swung whistling through the air. The stump-bar was no longer the tool of a grubbing sod-buster but a great, gleaming claymore, hilted and double-edged. And Helmut, the drifter, was one of the giant gods of the ancient Norse. Steel crashed against bone and sinew and flesh, tearing its bloody way through.

A gun winked in Helmut's face. A savage blow buffeted him, staggering him. There was a face behind the stabbing flame. The stump-bar was at the far end of a swing and suddenly onerously heavy. With an effort which cost him a gasping reach for air, Helmut reversed the bar and stabbed out with it. The wide spade bit on its end, parted the face in front of him cleanly in the middle. A man screamed. He heard shouts and rolling curses; a curtain of darkness fell over his eyes.

He lumbered toward the sounds, swinging the bar like a huge sword again. The shouts separated. One voice belonged to the deputy, McCann.

"Drop that gun, Totten—drop it or I'll drill you through, so help me! Leave him be. He's dead on his feet! And there's been enough of your high-riding. Back your boys out of here—easy. Keep clear of that bar!"

Helmut heard a stir to one side of him. Wheeling with a speed which made the bar in his hands whistle, he lashed out. At the same instant, a gun snapped angrily from the direction in which McCann's voice had sounded. The next second, the bar hit into another body. Some old wisdom let Helmut know, even in his blindness, that his weapon struck a man already dead.

McCann's bullet had been faster than the steel.

McCann's voice came again. "Anybody else want the same medicine? File out! Spence, line 'em out on the walk and draw their irons!"

There was the sound of batwings swinging. A hand touched Helmut's arm, its fingers fastening grimly. The touch was without enmity. Helmut lowered the bar, now become too heavy for him to hold.

Sam Aiken spoke in his ear, "For the love of God, Swede—"

Someone else took Helmut's other arm. He was propelled along until a table edge cut him at the knees and he was forced onto its flat surface on his back. Doctor Martin's flat, impersonal voice spoke a swift command to Aiken.

"I left my case on the walk outside, Sam. Get it!"

Aiken's steps thumped hurriedly away. Helmut brushed the doctor's pinioning grip away and sat upright.

"They want you at Beaman's—" he mouthed—"you go or I—"

His hands made wide, sweeping movements as though searching for the stump-bar. The doctor put a hand against his chest and shoved him flat.

"I've been to Beaman's. I sneaked out there this morning. Hal's all right, you iron-car-cassed fool. A lot more all right than you are. Lay still!"

Helmut thought about this. The doctor had been afraid. The doctor's wife had been afraid. Afraid for their lives. They had refused Mary Beaman's plea for help when Bert Totten and his men could hear them. They had acted as though they believed with Totten that a farmer was not worth the saving. But in spite of this fear, the little doctor had had sand enough to sneak out on the errand of mercy to which the oaths of his trade had bound him.

There was good in this country. And a man might even find neighbors. Sam Aiken would send a box of food. Dave Spence would argue a man from suicide and give two cows fresh with milk. The deputy, McCann, would even bring in the law to stop a slaughter. They did these things while they were in fear of Totten's hatred. Without that fear what would they do? He was thinking of this when the doctor made the first probe with a lance.

Agony exploded into a welcome blackness.

WHEN Helmut stirred he did not know where he was. He was a long time realizing he lay in a bedroom of the Beaman homestead. Hal sat propped and bandaged in a bed along the opposite wall. He was grinning.

Mary sat in a low chair beside Helmut's bed.

And suddenly it was no longer hard for him to understand this America. He felt no longer lonely and friendless. He was among his own kind—farmers, secure on their land and earnest in their friendship.

There was a stir at the door. Little Mary burst in, Bob at her heels.

"Mamma—the rector of the church. And some of the ladies—with a wagon!" the little girl chattered excitedly.

"Some more boxes and the rector says the team on the wagon is ours and there's a doll for Mary. I saw it!" The boy's eyes were dancing proudly.

Mary stood up and smiled at the children. She left the room and the little girl followed her. Bob lingered for a moment.

"Holy smoke, Helmut!" he breathed. "You scared 'em, all right, scared 'em to hell!"

He looked apprehensive as the final word slipped from his lips. Helmut grinned at the child.

"No, Bob," he said slowly. "I did not scare them. It was just that they did not know a farmer could fight like a cowman."

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 51)

1. In the language of the puncher, haze means to goad, chase, or urge. Thus, to haze in cattle means to drive the beasts in.

2. False. By far the great majority of range cattle are branded on the left hip. Just why this side was originally chosen is not known—but tradition now dictates the left hip will be the brand hip.

3. The foreman would signal for a stop by waving his hat about his head in a slow circle.

4. Road branding is the branding of cattle going on a certain cattle drive with a common brand. Thus, cattle belonging to different owners can all be kept in the same party.

5. According to cowboy belief, the horse-hair line coiled about the bedroll will keep insects and reptiles away from the sleeper. The belief holds that these creatures of the desert will not crawl across such a line.

6. An iron man is one who keeps the irons hot at branding time.

7. The "Four Six" brand was adopted in memory of a poker hand. This poker hand won a spread and some cattle which later became famous in the West. Scarce indeed is the old-timer who does not know of the 6666.

8. The duty of waking up the sleeping cowboys often falls to the cook—who must rise early and prepare breakfast anyway.

9. A skookum house is a jail . . . located within bounds of an Indian reservation.

10. The bell mare is used to keep the horses of a remuda together. She is so named because she wears a bell around her neck.

11. Pike's Peak is named for General Zebulon Montgomery Pike. The famous rock-

mass is located in Colorado, near Colorado Springs.

12. The California rig, so called because of its popularity in that western coastal state, is a one-cinch affair.

13. A tapadero is a wedge-shaped piece of leather which covers the front and sides of a stirrup. In this way, the stirrup is closed at the front and open at the back. The term has in some instances been shortened to "tap."

14. Side-lining is a term used in connection with hobbling horses. When side-lining a horse one ties a rear leg and a front leg—both on the same side—together, thus restricting the actions of the animal.

15. True. For all practical purposes colts simply are not born white.

16. A nester is a farmer who, by fencing off a small plot of land, cuts off access to a spring or water hole. A farm so located is known as a nest. For obvious reasons, nesters are most unpopular with cattlemen, and in the past many feuds have developed from this enmity.

17. Sam Bass was a well-known, and sometimes feared, outlaw who at one time operated in Texas and south-western United States.

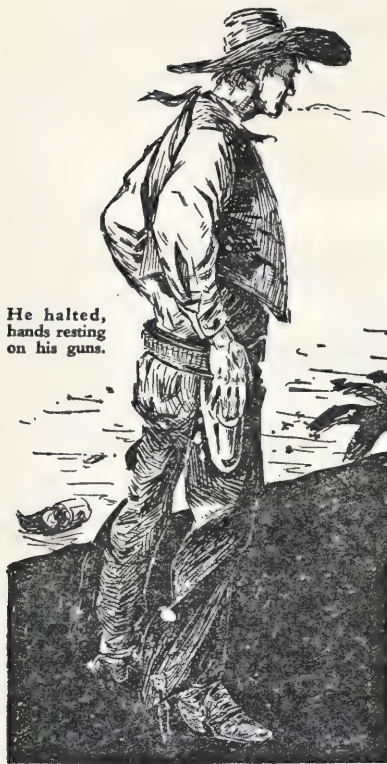
18. In the language of the cowpuncher, a "goose drownder" is a severe cloudburst.

19. A hogskin is an English saddle. This type of saddle, incidentally, is generally held in contempt by the true puncher, and none with an ounce of self respect would be caught dead forking one!

20. An eyeballer is a nosey person—a person always keeping his eye on somebody else's business.

By JOE PAYNE

He halted,
hands resting
on his guns.



HANGTOWN BRAND

SOME of the uneasiness left Marsha Middleton's blue eyes as she came in from the kitchen and saw that Mayor Torbitt still hadn't shown up. The clock over the door said seven. Maybe he would wait until morning, she thought hopefully. At least, maybe he wouldn't come until Ned was gone.

Her heart lightening, she set Ned's steak and potatoes before him and leaned over the counter, her dark head close to his, her lips pursed provocatively.

"Pay me now or later?"

Ned Hanley sniffed judiciously at the smoking victuals, winked at Fentriss, the saddle maker, who sat a few stools away.

He took the girl's small face between his two big hands. "I reckon it's now and later."

Old Sam Middleton poked his gray head through the kitchen service slot. "Who," he queried disgustedly, "is goin' to serve my cookin' to the customer comin' along the walk while you two bill and coo?"

"Would you make me watch you hanged or wait for years while you served a prison sentence? Would you expect me to go on the dodge with you—be an outlaw's girl?"

And then Marsha stepped apprehensively along the counter as she heard the heavy tread outside.

"Marsha will, pa," she answered with assumed cheerfulness.

Mayor Torbitt came in out of the Montana dusk. Thick-lipped and heavy-jowled, he planted his bulk by the counter, smiling.

"No service, thanks," he said. "This is a friendly call."

Marsha's apprehension increased as she saw Ned sliding off his stool. The cowboy's lean face was tight.

"It's time your hand was called," he said, staring at Torbitt. "You and your riffraff are living high off graft in this town. You encourage lawlessness yourself, then make the people pay off for so-called protection against it. Under your marshal's protection a woman isn't safe on the street. You're raking off on the gambling games and all of them are crooked. Marsha—"

"Ned," Marsha cried. "Wait!"

She ran to the till and counted out ten dollars. Ignoring old Sam's protest, she thrust the money toward the mayor.

"Here," she said. "Now please go."

He bowed with exaggerated courtesy. "With pleasure. We don't want trouble, I'm sure." Lifting his beaver hat, he went out.

THERE was silence in the eating house except for the clock ticking above the door. Finally old Sam spoke bitterly. "You had no business doin' that, Marsha. You should've told him."

"I know, pa."

She turned to Ned with a little placating smile, but the cowboy's eyes were still hard.

"I thought you had more spunk," he said shortly.

"Spunk?" She laughed tremulously. "It wasn't that. I just didn't want you getting into trouble on our account."

"Your trouble is my trouble."

She came to him and took his big hands in her own small ones.

"You're sweet, Ned," she murmured. "But it scares me to have you always so ready to settle things with your gun. Some day you'll get killed that way."

"I can take care of myself," he answered, almost roughly. "It sticks in my craw to let somebody run over you and Sam."

"I'm not as spineless as I seemed." She squeezed his hands. "We won't be paying the mayor off again."

"What do you mean?"

"You remember that house across from Mr. Fentriss' at the edge of town?"

"The Hartzell's? They moved out of it today to a ranch they've bought near Helena."

She smiled triumphantly. "And I've just

rented it. We're moving the eating house there."

He looked bewildered.

"It's just outside the town limits. Torbitt can't touch us there. It's perfect, Ned. We'll turn the downstairs into a dining room and live upstairs. We'll still get lots of Tepee business and it won't hurt our cowboy trade at all."

"Morgan's gone to Helena with his freight wagon," old Sam put in. "But he'll move us early in the mornin'."

"I'm in this, too," Fentriss said. "I'm moving my saddle shop." He slid off his stool. "I'll go see if Morgan is back."

"I'll get things cleaned up in the kitchen," said Sam.

Marsha looked at Ned anxiously. The cowboy seemed thoughtful.

"It may work," he nodded slowly, "although I'm not so sure. Anyhow"—his wide grin came suddenly—"it's worth trying."

He cupped her round chin in his palm.

"Sorry I lost my temper," he said contritely.

"Will you forgive me, if I stay in town and help you move in the morning?"

She slipped her arms about his neck. "Forgive," she whispered. "Pay you now or later?"

"Both," he said promptly. He kissed her.

THE sun was an hour high as she stood with Ned on the porch of the new eating house, watching Morgan, the freighter, swing his five-span mule outfit back toward the first straggly, weatherbeaten houses of Tepee two hundred yards away. The smell of frying bacon drifted from indoors where old Sam was puttering, his pegleg thumping happily. Across the road, Fentriss was moving tools and saddle leather inside his own house. Marsha sighed contentedly.

"I'd better get busy," she said. "You ride on to the Spade, cowboy. This is woman's work."

"I'll be back tonight," he grinned. "Don't you go raising prices because of your exclusive neighborhood."

Kissing her lightly, he started toward the gray gelding tied to a porch post. Then he halted, looking down the Tepee road. Two riders were coming toward them, their hoofbeats drumming through the clear, dry air. Uneasiness tugged at Marsha as she recognized Torbitt and his town marshal, Mel Robins.

"Goodbye, Ned," she said, striving for lightness. "See you tonight."

The cowboy didn't move.

"Goodbye," she repeated. She added urgently, "Better hurry, Ned. They'll be wondering at the ranch."

"No rush," he answered. He leaned casu-

ally against the post, drawing cigarette makings from his shirt pocket. Marsha felt suddenly helpless.

Torbitt and his companion stopped by the porch. There was a frown on the mayor's face as he glanced across the road toward Fentriss and back again. Beside him, his slate-eyed gunman lolled in his saddle watching Ned, his long thin hands resting in seeming carelessness against his thighs.

"I heard you were moving," Torbitt said. "Sudden, isn't it?"

Marsha forced a smile.

"This is a good location. We had to decide quickly."

"Any objections?" Ned asked pointedly.

"That depends," replied the mayor. "If they move their businesses here it will cost them two hundred dollars apiece, license fees."

"Two hundred dollars!" Marsha said incredulously. "Why, only six months ago we paid a hundred to open in Tepee. Anyhow—" she eyed him indignantly as she remembered—"we're not in Tepee now so we don't have to pay any license fee."

"That's right," old Sam asserted from the doorway. "This is outside the town limits."

"Town limits. So that's it." The mayor glanced at his gunman and smiled. "My dear Middleton," he said, "you're entertaining a wrong idea. Your being a few yards from the so-called town limits means nothing. You're obviously intending to draw on the town for business, therefore you're still a part of its business life. The license fee stands."

Sam's face reddened. "We couldn't pay that if we wanted to," he protested. "This ain't Tepee, I tell you. I reckon it could be called another town." A thought seemed to strike him. "Sure, that's it!" he cried excitedly. "This is my town I'm founding. It's Middleton!"

Ned straightened against the post. He threw away his cigarette. Something seemed to clutch at Marsha's throat.

Ned stated, "If Sam says this is Middleton, it's Middleton."

The Tepee town marshal stirred in his saddle, his pale, expressionless gaze fixed unblinkingly on Ned.

"Keep out of this, cowboy," he said softly. "The mayor is talkin'."

FEAR leaped through Marsha as she saw Ned crouch, his face blazing.

"No!" she cried. "Oh, no!"

She threw herself in front of the cowboy, her entwining arms pinning him to her body. She clung frantically, her ears closed against his furious protest as he struggled to free himself.

"Marsha! Let go of me!"

A harsh laugh sounded. She whirled, her

arms outflung, her body still pressed against the cowboy's.

"You fool!" she flung into Robbins' mocking face. "I've only kept him from killing you both. Go on away while there's time."

"We'll go, my dear," the mayor returned with sardonic enjoyment. "But we'll be back." He raised his voice so that it carried to Fentriss who was listening from his doorway. "I'm giving you until sundown to get that license fee together."

He nodded to Robbins and they rode back toward Tepee.

Marsha turned pleadingly toward Ned. He regarded her speechlessly, his face set.

"Suppose you kill him. Torbitt is too smart to fight you, himself. He'd only hire another gunman. And you're forgetting this—regardless of what we or our friends think, you'd have killed a lawman, even one like Robbins. The law would be against you. You'd end up a jailbird or an outlaw."

She grasped his wrists in trembling hands, her tear-stained face raised to his. "Ned, I love you and you say you love me. Would you make me watch you hanged or make me wait for years while you served a prison sentence? Or would you expect me to go on the dodge with you . . . an outlaw's girl?"

Muscles bunched along his lean jaw. His eyes bleak with suppressed anger and humiliation, he stared over the range where heat waves were beginning to dance above the dry, brown buffalo grass.

"I never thought of it like that," he admitted tautly. "But there's another side, too. The people's side. If you and Sam and Fentriss get away with this, all the decent element in Tepee will move out here. Torbitt's hold on the town will be broken."

"Let somebody else break it then," Marsha said passionately. "Maybe I'm selfish, but I'm thinking of us. Ned, go back to the Spade. Promise you won't come back tonight. Promise me that, if you love me."

HE SHOOK his head slowly.

"It's because I love you I'm refusing. If I don't protect you against those men I'll hate myself. And sooner or later you'd despise me."

"You're wrong," she said, with sharp urgency. "Can't you see?"

"No."

A bitter frustration seized her. She dropped his wrists.

"I meant what I said," she declared. "If you come here tonight, then—"

"Then what?"

"It will be over between us!" she flashed. "Over for good!"

He stared at her, his face whitening under its tan; then his anger flared.

"If that's the way you feel, all right!"

He turned abruptly. Untying the gelding, he slid into his saddle. Without a backward glance, he rode toward the Spade.

Marsha stood rigidly, watching his diminishing figure with unbelieving eyes. Her temper had fled and anguish was taking its place. He would turn back, she thought wildly; he would turn back, of course. But he didn't.

A sob shook her. She ran to the edge of the porch, gripping the rail.

"Ned!" she called. "Ned!"

"HE CAN'T hear you," old Sam said peevishly. "You've drove him away. That's what you get for tryin' to run him."

"I didn't mean to, pa." She wiped her eyes hurriedly, striving for calmness. "I can't let him go," she said shakily. "I'll ride after him. Mr. Fentriss will lend me his horse."

She paused beside the doorway.

"Pa, there's only one thing left," she said resolutely. "We'll give up the eating house. I'll marry Ned and we'll all three live at the Spade."

"Marsha!"

There was consternation in old Sam's face, then his jaw snapped shut. "You know I wouldn't do that," he said indignantly. "Go on and marry Ned, if he'll have you now—"

"But, pa," she reasoned. "There would be work for you at the ranch. You wouldn't have to feel—"

"Do you think I'd go out there and be handed some chore-boy job?" he burst out. "I can't ride no more and they've got a fine Chinese cook. You ought to be ashamed, Marsha. I've invested every cent I had in this business just to have some way to paddle my own canoe. Well, I can paddle it here and I ain't leavin'."

"We'll talk about it later," she said placatingly.

She brushed past him and left the porch, trying not to hear his stubborn angry shouting.

THE mid-morning sunshine was beating down from the burnished sky. Cattle bawled from cool draws along the ridge that bordered the Spade range. Marsha was just finishing her final rehearsal of the humble speech she had prepared for Ned when she rode Fentriss' sorrel mare up to the oak-shaded ranch.

The front of the house seemed deserted but a high nasal twang from the kitchen announced the presence there of the Chinese cook and she noticed somebody working at the gate of the pole corral. She rode toward the corral.

Jim Allen, the stocky owner of the Spade, was mending the gate. He lifted his hat, his blue eyes quizzical.

"Good morning, Marsha," he greeted. "Looking for somebody?"

"Yes, Ned. We didn't—that is—" she felt herself flushing—"I sort of missed him this morning in Tepee," she finished lamely.

The rancher looked at her oddly. "I'm afraid you've missed him here, too."

Her eyes widened. "You mean he's gone out on the range?"

Allen frowned. He seemed embarrassed and perplexed; a little angry.

"No. I mean he's just gone."

"Gone?" Marsha stared at him stupidly. "Gone—for good?"

He nodded. "I can't understand it. He rode up a while ago, all upset, and called for his time. Didn't give any reason; just quit flat, like that. Then he tore on out without another word."

The girl caught her breath. "Did he ride back toward Tepee? A roundabout way, maybe?"

"No, he rode on up the Helena road." The rancher scratched his head and smiled. "Do you suppose the young whelp is going to the capital to run for governor or something?"

His expression changed as he met her stricken glance.

"Sorry, Marsha. I reckon it's not a joking matter. Wasn't to me, either, for I lost a good man. I'm afraid he's got himself into a scrape in Tepee." He paused inquiringly, but Marsha said nothing, so he continued. "Maybe you know more about where he's gone than I do. He's a top hand, of course. He could get a job on any ranch between here and Canada."

The rancher's look was pitying.

She straightened. She forced a smile.

"Thanks, Mr. Allen. I—I just wanted to see him. I guess he's old enough to take care of himself, wherever he went." Nodding brightly, she turned the sorrel.

There was a fixed smile on her lips as she rode past the house and onto the Tepee road again. Behind her the thin high drone of a Chinese love song came from the kitchen. Cattle still bawled softly from the draws and the sun beat down. The sorrel mare slackened in her galloping. She slowed to a trot, then to a walk, but Marsha sat unheeding in the saddle, letting the reins lie slack across the animal's mane, her blue eyes wide and unseeing. She had ridden a mile that way before her tears came, hot and blinding. . . .

At the eating house, the day dragged by. Occasional hungry miners and freighters stopped and several of the regular Tepee customers dropped in. Marsha served them mechanically.

Ned hadn't loved her, she thought choking—

ly for the hundredth time. If he had, he couldn't have ridden away like that without a word of goodbye. No matter what she had said, he couldn't have done it.

There was no use trying to pretend it didn't matter. It did matter—terribly. It was no use, either, trying to be glad he wouldn't be getting into any more trouble on her account. All she knew was that there was only a dull ache where her heart had been.

SHE glanced across the road where old Sam was talking with Fentriss. Finally the saddle maker shook his head emphatically and Sam stomped back angrily. He went into the house and returned a moment later with his ancient .45 Colt strapped to his skinny middle.

"I'll take on that gunman," he muttered with a sidelong glance at the girl. "I said I ain't leavin', that's what I said."

Hobbling to the end of the porch he took a shot at a sage clump but his draw was clumsy and his bullet kicked up dust six feet from the target. Marsha smiled painfully.

"Never mind, pa," she said. "Never mind."

"No use being a fool, Sam," Fentriss urged as he crossed the road. His brow was creased with worry. "I reckon there's nothing to do but hire Morgan's wagon again and go back where we came from."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Fentriss," Marsha said miserably. "It's all my fault."

The sun slipped behind the mountains. The coolness of the long summer twilight came seeping into the air. Pleasure bound cowboys started drumming in from the range. The evening hilarity in Tepee was beginning. Swaggering men appeared on the board walks and tinny pianos banged. Somewhere a gunshot sounded, followed by yells.

Two riders swung away from a saloon hitch rack and came galloping toward the eating house—Torbitt and his town marshal. They reined up in front of the porch. The mayor studied the men silently for a moment, then he smiled.

"You folks have made up your minds, I take it."

Sam and Fentriss made no reply and his gaze shifted to Marsha. She nodded dully.

"Yes. We've—"

"Quiet!" exclaimed old Sam. He peered up the road toward the Spade, chuckling. "I say we haven't."

Marsha stiffened. Among the town-bent cowboys came one astride a gray gelding. Dust billowed behind the racing animal and on its back was a familiar figure. The girl's listlessness dropped away.

Mel Robbins crowded his horse in front of the mayor's. Robbins' body was tense, the killer's light burned in his eyes.

Ned halted in front of the Tepee marshal. "I said I'd be back," he announced, a confident ring in his voice. "I've got something to show you. I warn you, Robbins, don't make any move."

Marsha saw the mayor's meaning glance upon her, knew he was expecting her to interfere. Her clenched hand moved to her mouth. She wanted to cry out but something restrained her. In an agony of indecision she stood rooted to the porch.

Torbitt scowled. She drew a quivering breath. Suddenly she dropped her hands to her sides.

Let him fight, she thought fiercely.

"Arrest that man, Robbins," Torbitt said. She closed her eyes tightly. If he survived, she would go with him. They would go on the dodge together. She loved him that much—"Stand back!" Ned warned.

Two explosions blasted the air. Marsha went rigid. Her heart contracted sickly. Silently she prayed.

Suddenly old Sam shouted.

She opened her eyes. Ned still sat on the gelding, his gun smoking in his hand. But Robbins was swaying in his saddle, a stupid look on his face. His right arm was dangling.

Blood coursed again through Marsha's veins. Suddenly weak, she leaned against the post. Ned was drawing an envelope from his shirt pocket.

"I've just got back from Helena," he said in that confident tone. "I've got a message from the Montana Supreme Court."

The girl listened in amazement as he read:

"It is the unanimous opinion of this court that the populated place called Middletown, founded and named by Samuel Middleton, is a town in its own right, separate and distinct from the town of Tepee, and is entitled to all the legal rights and privileges thereof—"

The cowboy looked down the road into Tepee's street where people were gathering on the walks. He smiled, as if there were more to tell.

"I nominate Sam Middleton for mayor of Middletown," he said.

Fentriss' face lighted up. "Second!" he cried. "All in favor—?"

"Let the people come," Ned said, his jaw setting. "There'll be law in our town."

He dismounted and stepped out on the porch. He took Marsha's shoulders between his big hands, his eyes beginning to dance.

"We've got a mayor and a marshal. What," he asked, "is it we need next?"

"A preacher," she replied promptly, her heart singing. "Or maybe a justice of the peace."

"Right," he grinned; then his lips came down on hers.

Trail of the Hunted Ones

He had never killed a man, but he was going to now, for there would be no peace where the Sacramento rolled if he didn't —no peace for a man coming home with a bride on his arm.

He reached forward and swung the pin. . . .



By
**M. HOWARD
LANE**

IT WAS like a dream to the boy, this coming home. A dream and a prayer that had been with him constantly these last two years while he had sailed the wild seas from the Sandwich Isles to far Cathay and back now through the Golden Gate into the security of San Francisco's harbor.

Lights glowed in a thousand places on the high hills where he had never seen them before, and he caught the impression that solid buildings had risen to replace the brush huts and tents that lined the muddy streets in '49.

He stood now in the waist of the *California Queen*, leaning his elbows on the taff-rail, waiting for the fog to come rolling in. He waited patiently, for two years' planning had taken the fine edge of excitement from this long anticipated hour.

When the fog came he would dive overside, for it would be a sheltering blanket to protect him from the bullets that might follow in his wake.

Like pictures rising from the rippling wavelets against the hull of the *California Queen*,

Bill Pride looked back and saw the day he had ridden into San Francisco on the wagon seat beside his father. A wide-eyed eighteen-year-old he'd been then, a youngster big for his age, giving promise of the man he would become. One of Captain Sutter's barges had brought them down the Sacramento River and into Suisun Bay, and so to the muddy Embarcadero shore where the hulks of beached ships bore mute testimony to the call of "Gold" that had swept about the world. Their crews were in San Francisco, or on their way to *El Dorado*. A few proud clippers still rode at anchor that long gone day, and one of them had been the *California Queen*, but Bill Pride hadn't paid the ship much attention.

He'd left Captain Sutter's barge, and driven through clinging mud into the heart of the shack city, and in Portsmouth Square inhabitants had gathered about their wagons. Sacks of potatoes, carrots, and turnips, made up the load they had brought down the Sacramento, and men starved for vegetables had bought them at a price high enough to make a man's ears burn with shame at accepting it. But Hank Pride, his father, had taken their money.

"Son," he'd said wisely, "maybe there is gold in Sacramento sands, but there's more right here for us. Men must eat and they tire of sowbelly and beans. Take the wagon and go back to the barge for another load. I will wait here, and have a taste of grog while you're gone."

He had been gone a long time, Bill Pride reflected a little grimly, for a pair of burly gentlemen had engaged a long-armed, wide-shouldered boy in pleasant conversation along the shore front. He hadn't seen the third one until it was too late, for a crushing weight had seemed to split his skull to smithereens, and a long-boat had spirited him aboard the *California Queen*. He had waked with a headache, and the unfamiliar feel of Pacific swells beneath him.

A sailor who had not been unsympathetic had doused him with a bucket of icy seawater, and drawled: "You can't be sleepin' forever, young'un. Bully Masters wants you on deck. He's the mate, and he'll make a first class hand of you, or you'll feel the taste of the cat at your back."

He'd made a hand of his own accord after watching Bully Masters whip one shanghaied land-lubber to bloody pulp.

And the time had passed, and he had seen far lands, and planned his escape once *The Queen* returned to San Francisco.

There'd been only one witness to see him shanghaied—a girl who was searching frantically amongst the litter of trunks and crates and general cargo that strewed the sands. He remembered her as being tall and young and bewildered.

On nights when the wind howled through icy rigging he'd often thought of the girl whose cry at sight of him dropping like a dead man was his last memory of that dreadful day. He had toyed with the idea that he might find her when *The Queen* came once again to the Embarcadero shore, and tell her that he hadn't been killed. That he had lived to come home. A step sounded behind him and Bill Pride turned. The light of a ship's lantern slung in the rigging sparked against the bright buttons on Bully Masters' greatcoat. The man was broad and squat, with a heavy bland face that never seemed to change expression.

"Get for'ard," he ordered, "and rig more lanterns along this rail. The fog is rolling in over Yuerba Buena island and we'll have none of our hands slipping overside when it comes." Then, for the first time, he seemed to recognize the deck-hand facing him, and memory of how they'd hoisted this one aboard flashed across his face. "Pride!" he said, "Pride, get below! I'll send another to set the lanterns."

The belaying pin racked beneath the rail was cool against Bill Pride's hand. "Ah!" was all he said, and two years before the mast had taught him to step lively. He moved forward one pace and swung the pin, and caught the look of surprise that crossed the mate's face. Bully Masters flung up a heavy arm to take the blow, but he was too slow. Bill felt the pin strike solidly along the side of the mate's head, and he watched the man's knees buckle.

Bully Masters struck the deck, but his pale eyes were still open. He seemed oddly paralyzed, but he was not unconscious. "Pride," he said, and his voice was slow and clear, "I will follow you to hell if the trail runs that far!"

Bill Pride dropped the pin, and turned to the rail, and in his ears was the cry of voices. There were hands aboard this ship who would shoot their own brother if they thought it might give them favor in Bully Masters' eyes. That was why he had been waiting for the fog; but he could wait no longer.

With a deep breath in his lungs he went over the rail in one long, arrow-straight plunge. Phosphorescence boiled in his wake, and followed his kicking legs as he struck for shore.

Bill watched the bullets dimpling water all about him, but his head was a low, bobbing target, hard to hit in the early night. The piles of an Embarcadero pier stretched out toward him, and he rested a moment, his hand holding to the slimy barnacles that festooned it.

A glance back across his shoulder at *The Queen* showed him something he hadn't expected. They were lowering a longboat, and a short, heavy man, built like a bear, was

climbing down into it. Bully Masters. Bill remembered what the mate had said. He was taking his trail already. Something close to panic rose in him suddenly, for though he was twenty years old now, and two years had matured his body to man's stature, there was still enough youngness left in his heart and spirit to make him conscious of fear.

Bully Masters knew the world, from one end to the other. He knew men and all their tricks. He knew a whole lot more than a twenty-year-old who had spent most of his life on a Sacramento farm. Bully Masters was like a bull-dog. Once his jaws were locked he would never let go. And the mate would never let go of the idea he had expressed. Bill Pride saw that, and the thought chilled him more than the cold sea water wetting his body.

Then he turned his face shoreward, swimming in the thick shadow of the pier. He could hear the creak of oars in tholes. Bully Masters was not far behind him, and Bill Pride came to one gray conclusion. He could never go back to the Sacramento, never call his life his own while Bully Masters still searched for him. One of them would have to die here in San Francisco, before either could achieve peace again.

HE FELT sand beneath his feet, and it was coming home for a truth to a man who had been born in California. With the water running from his striped jersey and sagging the rough jeans belted with braided rope about his lean waist, Bill Pride stepped ashore. His shoes squashed with water as he scrambled up to solid Embarcadero sands. He cast a glance in both directions. Off to the left there was the empty blackness of salt-grass swamps, where, he figured, Bully Masters would decide a fugitive might hide. To the right lay the brightness of what they had started to call Rotten Row even in '49—beached hulks that had been converted into taverns and hotels to house the growing population of San Francisco. And straight ahead was Montgomery Street, climbing into the heart of this new metropolis.

Bill Pride looked down at his soggy clothes and shook his head. If he tried to lose himself amongst the buildings starting to grow along Montgomery any passerby would be able to guess that he was a deserter from the *California Queen*. If he chose the marshes, he would likely have pneumonia by morning. A shiver was already bothering his spine. And if he sought refuge in any Embarcadero tavern, Bully Masters would hear of it.

Intent on his thoughts, he had been unaware of men in the vicinity until a pair stepped from behind stacked cargo on the pier. The sound of their feet caught his attention, and Bill whirled, hand moving down to his only

weapon, a short dirk thrust, naked, through his belt.

"Take 'er easy, take 'er easy, bucko," one of the pair raised a shadowy arm, and his voice was redolent with soft laughter. "We're not here to cause you trouble. We saw you leave *The Queen*, and heard the shots. You ain't the first who's taken French leave of a new ship in the harbor, and probably won't be the last. Now if you've a bit of gold about your pants, me'n Sam here will stake you to a fresh suit, and a tot of rum to warm your vitals. If there's enough hard money in your jeans, we'll even show ye a way to get to the gold fields."

The sound of oars was closer now, and there were times when a man had no choice. Hard money lay in his pocket, most of the meager pay *The Queen's* captain had grudgingly doled out to his crewmen these last two years. Enough, when you figured the total, to take a man back to the Sacramento with a bride on his arm.

For that, too, had been one of Bill Pride's dreams when the night-watch was long. He'd thought of the bewildered girl and she had been a comfort to him. Of course the notion was foolish. He'd told himself that, but just the same thinking about her had been a nice way to pass the dark hours. Now he was in trouble and he could feel his treasured pay melting away.

"I've got the gold," his teeth chattered on the words, "and if we're going we'd better get a move on."

"Bueno," the speaker nodded. "Come along with us."

The man called Sam moved on his left, the other on his right. It was too dark for him to get a good look at their faces. They headed at a fast walk toward the lights of Rotten Row, until the one called Sam began to breathe like a steaming kettle.

"Ease up, Todd," he complained. "What 'n-hell's the hurry? Ain't nothin' going to go wrong. It never has—"

"Save your breath for walking!" Todd snapped.

Bill got his first good look at the pair as they passed through a patch of light cast from the open door of a ship tavern. Todd, on his right, was a tall, narrow-shouldered man with a thin, stubby face. He was as light and quick on his feet as a snake gliding through grass. Sam was beef-faced, with flabby jowls that shook at every step. He didn't like their looks, but sometimes a man sought any port.

Todd swung down an alley between two beached hulks. He opened a dark door that had been cut into the bow of one of them. Dim light came out, and the fat Sam stepped into a room that had been crudely ceiled and sided.

"You two wait here for me," Todd said, "until I see if the coast is clear. I'll bring your clothes, bucko." His light-colored eyes surveyed the deserter's length. "'Bout six feet," he hummed, "mebbe weighin' a hundred and eighty. Nice shape to you, lad. No wonder Bully Masters doesn't want to lose a hand like you."

Bill stepped inside the small room, and he knew even as Todd swung the door shut that he had made a mistake. For in his talk with the pair he *hadn't named the mate of the California Queen*. Yet Todd knew it.

"Set down, lad, set down!" Sam said sociably.

Bill Pride turned and he was cursing himself for being a greenhorn, but something told him not to show the knowledge he had gained. Todd was right now going back along the Embarcadero to lay his hands on Bully Masters, and the mate would pay through the nose to learn his whereabouts. That was how this pair made their money. They waited for just such fools as himself to come along, then sold them back to their masters at a pretty profit.

FAT SAM was seated on a bench cleated to the far wall of the small room. He was puffing, and his coat was open, and he had a big Colt shoved inside the waistband of his pants. His right hand lay close to it and his sly black eyes were watching.

Bill Pride kept all expression from his face. There was a table in the center of the room, and a broken-backed chair. He moved to the table and sat down, and put his foot on the chair seat. He laid his arms along its back, casually gripping the hickory rungs.

"How long will it take Todd to get me clothes?" he asked.

"It ain't fer," Sam chuckled. "He'll be along directly, lad."

Bill pulled the chair from beneath his foot, and flung it in one smooth motion. Surprise crossed the fat man's countenance, and he tried to drag his Colt, but the chair caught him full in the face before he could clear the gun.

Fat Sam slipped from the bench without sound. Bill stooped and took the revolver from the other's fingers. He looked at the caps and loads, and stepped to the door. He was calm, and that surprised him a little.

Bill put the muzzle of the gun close to the heavy lock on the door, and pulled the trigger. Metal shattered. The door swung outward of its own accord. Bill stepped into the clear.

"Pride!" It was Bully Masters' voice crying his name. "That's Pride!" A Colt's roar filled the narrow alley between the two hulks, and Bill heard the bullet sigh just in front of his face. He whirled and fired at a half-dozen shadowy shapes rushing down the alley toward

him. One of them stumbled and went down. Bill whirled the opposite way. Open sands lay in that direction. He made them, long legs flying, and whirled straight back along the opposite side of the hulk.

A path cut to the left over the sand-hills to Montgomery Street and he took it, with the pack laboring along in his wake. Bill gave the bay one agonized glance. A white blanket of fog swirled lazily over the water, but an off-shore breeze was keeping it from covering the city. However, there'd be dark alleys once he reached the substantial buildings he could see rising ahead. A fugitive might hide in one along with the rats, Bill Pride thought. But when tomorrow came there'd be no place for him to go.

His striped jersey, salt-crusted pants and rope belt would identify him to the first man looking his way. And Bully Masters might post a notice in Portsmouth Square offering a reward for this deserter. He'd done that in the Sandwich Isles, and he'd followed the same practice on the China Coast. Yes, Bully Masters would follow him to hell.

Yes, Bully Masters would follow him to hell. Breath was sobbing in his chest by the time he reached the buildings climbing Montgomery street. Mouldy sea-biscuit and wormy salt-horse was not the diet to give a man much reserve strength.

"You've got to find shelter, and a change of clothes," Bill Pride told himself. "Find 'em, mister, and maybe you'll have a chance."

High board fences closed in the yards between some of the buildings. They echoed the slogging beat of his feet as he ran, and Bill saw the vague shine of faces come to lighted windows overlooking the street. They stared out curiously at him, and Bill Pride cursed. He was leaving a trail a yard wide and a mile long.

The white shine of clothes hanging on a line behind one of the fences caught his eye, and lifted the beat of his heart suddenly. It looked like laundry wash drying there. He visioned shirts and pants and turned to the fence.

The revolver was an unaccustomed weight in his hand. Bill rammed it through his belt, and pulled himself to the top of the boards.

"There's a gate," a calm voice said, "down at the other end!"

SURPRISE as much as dulling fatigue topped Bill Pride from his perch. He lit on hands and knees and staggered to his feet. Against the white backing of a sheet stood a tall, dark-haired girl. Bill Pride blinked, and knew that he was dreaming again. The same dreams he'd had on long night-watches in the China Seas. He'd imagined meeting this girl again, dreamed of it often,

but he had never pictured anything like this. "Ma'am," he stuttered, "ma'am—" and it seemed to be all he could say.

"Somebody's chasing you," the girl said, and there seemed to be no fear in her voice. "I heard you coming along the street. Now I can see why. You're a sailor, and since the *California Queen* is the only ship that dropped anchor today, I'll guess that you're a deserter from her."

"Your guess, ma'am," Bill Pride told her, "is a good one. I'll find that gate and meet them in the street. There'll be no trouble for you."

The girl had taken a step closer to him. She was peering up into his face, and there was a strange, musing look about her lips. "A couple of years ago," she said, "my mother and I reached here. Dad died of fever coming through the Straits of Magellan, after losing all our money in a gambling game aboard ship. He left us with our luggage, and you can believe it or not, a wash-tub my mother had insisted on bringing along. For cleanliness, she has always said, is next to godliness."

"I was hunting that tub when I saw a boy knocked down and carried into a long-boat that hurried him out to the *California Queen*. I found our tub and mother and I have made a living from it ever since—a good one you can be sure with the dandies in Portsmouth Square paying a dollar apiece for laundered shirts. There's been many a time since, with my arms in the suds when I've thought of the boy they shanghaied—"

Bill Pride laughed, and for the space of a minute he forgot Bully Masters and the blood-hungry crew with him.

Other feet were echoing along Montgomery Street, and a voice cried from a window down the way: "He ain't far ahead of you. I saw him running toward Ma Madden's Laundry."

Bill turned toward the fence, and his lips were tight. He reached for the Colt thrust through his belt, but the girl's fingers caught his arm.

She said swiftly, "This way." She ducked through hanging wash, and Bill Pride followed her. He watched her unpin a frilled white shirt and pair of dark trousers.

"They need ironing," she said demurely, "but perhaps you won't mind."

Bill Pride grinned. There'd never been a girl like this in all the world. Her fingers were warm against his hand as she led him toward a back door in their two-story house. The dark room they entered was warm and smelled of soap.

"We have four tubs now," she told him proudly.

"I'll buy your mother a dozen!" he promised her, and the singing was still in his heart.

He might die tonight, and he might live to see another day, but either way there was one thing he had to find out now.

"My mother and me—" the girl corrected.

"Not you," Bill told her. He had his arm about her waist suddenly. "Not while the Sacramento rolls through land rich as ours. Wouldn't you rather see the sun rise on grain fields than a batch of dirty wash? I've thought of taking you there until you feel like a part of me now. We're not strangers—"

"No," the girl sighed. "No, we're not strangers. I've dreamed of you when my back has ached from scrubbing. Oh, this is the most foolish thing that has ever happened. A man and woman cannot find love this way—"

Bill Pride had the clothes he was to wear over his free arm. They were still there when he pushed the girl aside and turned, for his ears had picked up the stealthy scrape of a foot on the steps outside the door. It creaked open in front of him and brass buttons gleamed vaguely in the night.

"So," Masters said almost pleasantly, "and I saw the wash and figured you might be trying to steal a change of clothes."

He could not clear the revolver in his waistband before the other fired, was the thought that crossed Bill Pride's mind. In the dark he could see the animal-like shine of the mate's eyes, and the pale glitter of the man's nickel-plated revolver. The gambler's shirt and trousers lay heavy along his left arm, and he flung them straight at that bear-like figure on the steps. They struck with tangling promptness as the mate's gun spoke. Bill felt the scrape of its lead across his ribs, then the Colt he'd taken from Fat Sam was in his hand. He thought then of how he had never killed a man, but he was going to now, for there'd be no peace where the Sacramento rolled if he didn't. No peace for a wayfarer returning home with a bride on his arm.

Bill Pride steadied his aim, and then he squeezed the trigger. Masters straightened, and he quit fighting the frilled shirt that tangled about his face. He dropped his arms as though they were very heavy.

"Ah—" he said, and then his figure seemed to melt into the darkness of the yard.

A voice cried from near the fence. "He got Bully—the cuss is in there but I'm not going after him. There'll be no pay in it for us with Masters gone."

"There's gold up along the American," another answered, "and I'm for there. Pride's done us all a favor, if you ask me!"

Bill felt the girl come back close to him, and her fingers touched the blood along his side. "You're hit—"

"A scratch," Bill told her "that some soap-suds will wash away. Nothing that will keep us from the Sacramento."

BOOTHILL BOUND

"The border is twenty miles away, and only three Mex boys are left. You're bleeding white, Elwood, and it's time to decide—who runs this ranch?"

She trained the rifle on the rope.



CHAPTER ONE

Man Wanted—Dead!

THE freight train from Pyramid clattered into Conestota about three o'clock that midsummer day and stopped to cut out a couple of cars. The station agent went out to give the conductor his train orders, and as he came back, a man in a white Stetson hat climbed down from an empty flatcar and walked toward him. He was slim and compactly built, though larger and heavier-set

than he appeared at first glance. Heat vibrated from the small, mustard-colored depot, and the sun hit so straight and hard that the man threw only a blot of shadow as he tramped down the cinder walk to where the agent stood.

"Howdy," the agent said.

The stranger answered, "Howdy. Have you got a saddle here for me, I shipped collect three days ago?"

"Saddle?" The agent thought a moment.

"Oh, yeah. You Tuck Samson?"

"That's right."

They walked inside the depot, and the agent



By ROD PATTERSON

promptly produced an old battered hull with its stirrups tied over the horn. Tuck Samson signed the receipt and paid the charge with a silver dollar, receiving his change with a non-committal smile. Then he said, "Can I use your washroom, mister?"

The agent assented with a nod. "Hop to it, pilgrim."

Tuck was gone a long time, but when he finally came back he was freshly shaven and had scrubbed the soot and cinders from his face and hands. He was young—not over thirty—with straight black hair like an Indian's, with black eyebrows and black hair on the backs of his hands and on his long, tapering fingers. There was a range-bred toughness about him and he had the spare hips and high shoulders of a horseman. The nondescript clothing he

wore was a weathered brown, and it clung to his rangy frame as naturally as bark clings to a tree—shirt, vest, and California britches and boots, all a neutral tone of brown. His white hat was not new, and it, too, had a faded look.

"I'm makin' an inquiry for a man named Elwood," he said in his Texas drawl. "Mark Elwood. Know him?"

"Eh?" The agent gave an involuntary start, his interest suddenly whipped up and keen. He studied the young man with a hard care. "Elwood?" he said then, slowly. "Why, yes. He operates a cow outfit ten miles south of here. Aimin' to ride for him?"

"Ain't made up my mind, yet." He didn't fancy the man's manner much, and he bent and heaved his saddle to his shoulder, and moved out into the slanting sunlight with the short, mincing steps of a man on high-heeled boots, heading for Conestota's dusty square, a block away.

He didn't walk more than ten yards before the dry crunch of cinders made him look up quickly, and he saw a tall, raw-boned man with a thin, pointed face, the jaw-line of which was fuzzed by a week-old growth of sandy beard. The newcomer's eyes were unusually small and close-set, pocketed in bluish, hood-like lids. A gray shadow, cast by the pulled-

down brim of his hat, lay on the upper part of his face, but it didn't dim the feline brightness of those strange almost ochre-colored eyes.

The man said, "You're Tucker Samson, ain't yuh?"

"That's right." Tuck stopped, balancing the heavy Meaney saddle. He spoke, not unpleasantly but without any particular wish for further conversation. "S'pose you'd be from Circle-M."

"I might," the man said, his lips barely moving with the words. "And I might not."

"Spit 'er out. What d'you want," Tuck said impatiently.

"I'm here to tell yuh Mark Elwood's done changed his mind. He won't be needin' a manager now."

TUCK lowered the saddle to the ground and came erect again. His voice was quiet and restrained. "Hell of a time to tell a man," he said, "after he's bounced his bones over a hundred miles to take the job."

"That's too bad," the man said mildly, blandly. "Jest too damn bad."

"Well," Tuck commented without anger, "I'll ride out there and hand Elwood the dandiest chunk of tongue-oil he ever heard."

"I wouldn't." The stranger suddenly blocked Tuck's way. "Wouldn't be what I'd call healthy to ride out to Circle-M." He grinned humorlessly. "They's a train south due here in half an hour. I'd git on it if I was you."

"You would?" There was a noticeable lack of intonation in Tuck's easy voice. He smiled softly. "But, friend, you ain't me. Besides I like the scenery around here. Step aside!"

The man took Tuck's hard stare, his own look blankly fixed on a spot above Tuck's head. He seemed to be the victim of sudden deafness, for he said, "Be reasonable, Samson. I don't want no trouble with you, and I'm dead sure yuh don't want none with me. If you're broke, I'll pay your carfare back to Pyramid."

Tuck thought, *Well, he knows who I am and where I'm from. Wonder what else he knows?* He said, "Well, I am broke, mister. Rode the rattler all the way up here. But"—the smile still stuck—"you ain't got enough dinero to pay me off. Not now, you ain't."

The stranger brought his eyes down to Tuck's face. "Oh, a tough 'un, hey?"

"Not tough," Tuck said softly. "Just curious."

The man's glance was speculative, wary. "Ever hear o' the cat that got nose? And where he ended up?"

"No," Tuck said. "But I *did* hear about the one that was skinned a hundred different ways."

The stranger wasn't smiling now. He tried to out-stare Tuck and failed; he pulled his gaze away, and stood aside, placing his thin

shoulders against the depot wall, and jerked a sack of Bull from the pocket of his dirty checkered shirt.

Tuck stooped, picked up his saddle. Holding it by the horn he slung it over his shoulder, then went tramping beyond the station toward the square. In front of the town's only hotel stood a dusty stage coach, its four-horse string dozing and switching flies. The driver, a dried-up little runt of a man, ran calloused thumbs under his greasy suspenders, and let them snap. "Circle-M? That's ten miles. Dollar fifty, friend."

Tuck threw his saddle in the rear boot, dug out and counted the money. His passage paid, he had two coppers and a two-bit piece left in his hand. His grin was wry, his hazel eyes satirical. "Maybe," he said to himself, "it's boot-hill bound—one way and no return. Sometimes, Samson, I get to wonderin' if your head's just right."

When the stage rolled out of Conestota, a half hour afterward, Tuck Samson was riding on the driver's seat, rubbing elbows and swapping yarns with the driver, Bill McCoy.

THE whole story—the second installment of which had just begun—had started two months before, while Tuck was riding for Anchor down in the Nueces country. The opening paragraph had been the letter he got from his brother Bob, who ran the old home ranch near Pyramid. The letter advised him, Tuck, to come home pronto, as they had had an offer for the spread and Bob thought they ought to sell. Bob said he'd close the deal unless he had word from Tuck to call it off. But Tuck hadn't written. He gave his notice to Anchor and, a week later, was on his way to Pyramid by train, to collect his half of the selling price—eighteen hundred dollars in U.S. cash.

When he reached Pyramid, he rented a horse and rode at once to the home ranch on the Trampas River. Something about the place, when he finally reached it and had knocked on the front door of the old log house, impressed him as being not quite right. He couldn't put a finger on what was wrong, though, until he knocked for the fourth time and failed to get a rise out of anybody. He tried the latch. The door was locked; the windows were down and fastened. The house was utterly, completely silent, though Bob's chickens squawked discontentedly from the rear. There was no smoke drifting from the chimney, no smell of food or cookery. There was, above all, a hollow emptiness in the sound of Tuck's knocking on the door that was both eerie and sepulchral. Tuck thought vaguely about the thirty-six hundred dollars Bob must have collected for the ranch—

Then Tuck saw Bob's striped tabby cat

asleep in the sunshine out in the yard. He blinked, puzzled, undecided what to do. All at once he spotted Bob's shotgun canted against the house's outer wall. It had, he knew, been a very good weapon, and Bob had always been extra fussy about its care, but here it was out-of-doors and, as he went over and examined it, he saw that there were tiny specks of rust at the end of its muzzle. It would take days in the open to rust a gun like that, especially in this hot, dry air.

Thoughtfully, still in a quandary, Tuck went back to the front door. He looked around for a moment; then headed his horse down the wagon road that led north and passed the homestead of Sam Calhoun, a mile away.

When he reached Calhoun's and the homesteader came out all grins, he said, "Seen anything of Bob Samson, brother?"

"Yeah," Calhoun said, "I seen him three-four days ago. No, he didn't say he was movin' out this week. Said he was waitin' fer his brother, to pay him off—had some money fer him, seems like. Yuh know, he sold the place to Banker Stackhouse in town."

"Was he alone when you saw him last, Calhoun?"

"No," the squatter stated positively. "There was two hombres stayin' with him. Bob introduced 'em to me. Can't seem to recollect their names, though. One was tall and kind of heavy-set. T'other tall but a lot thinner, with sort of yellow eyes. Oh, yeah, the big one was called Berger or Barger—or the like o' that."

Well, Tuck had ridden back to the spread, and an hour later, while following sign down near the creek, he found a freshly dug grave. Bob was in it, scarcely deep enough to keep the coyotes off him.

Bob's head had been bashed in, and he'd been stabbed a dozen times with a heavy-bladed knife.

Tuck had chewed on his anger and his grief for a week while the local sheriff scratched half-heartedly for evidence, finding none. No one had ever heard of the two strangers—one called Berger or Barger, the other a man with yellow eyes—and so the whole case had been placed on the shelf despite Tuck's outraged objections.

And Tuck was broke and filled with bitterness and vengeful thoughts.

And then, two months later while working as a swamper in the Buck Saloon, he'd seen the advertisement in the Pyramid Post. It read:

RANCH MANAGER WANTED

Good job open for a first-class ramrod good at figures. \$150 a month and found. Apply:

CIRCLE-M

Conestota, Tex.

M. Elwood, Owner L. Barger, Foreman

NOW, as he rode on the high box seat of the Conestota Stage, Tuck read the ad again, then returned it to his vest pocket. He tightened his mouth with a wry grin. "Funny, Bill," he murmured, "how life kicks you in the face, then kisses you."

"What?" the driver asked with a sidelong glance at Tuck. "What was that you said?"

"Nothing. How long you been high-ballin' this rig?"

"Too damn long," the driver growled, "for a stove-up old man like me."

"You ain't old," Tuck said. "A man ain't old till they throw dirt and rocks on his chest." His eyes turned bitter at the thought, and he closed his mouth and did not speak again.

Bill McCoy took the lines in his left hand, cleared his mouth of tobacco and made his sage remark: "Circle-M usta be the finest layout in this part o' Texas. No more, though. They's a pair o' blacklegs runnin' it now for Old Man Elwood and his gal. Too bad. They're damn fine folks."

Tuck moved his white hat far back; under it his hair showed raven black. He dipped a tobacco sack from his vest pocket, said, "Friend, I think I'm goin' to like the Elwoods fine."

He had the cigarette to his mouth and was lighting it, cupping the match against the wind, when the shot came, cutting into the muffled rattle of harness and the whimpering creak of stage springs. Tuck heard the vicious *spang* of the bullet.

He spat the smoke from his lips, pulled his gun, flung himself full length on the swaying deck of the stage in one swift, flowing movement. Bill McCoy snarled an oath, and lashed out with his long whip as he dropped down into the open boot at his feet.

The high timber beside the trail streamed past, fading swiftly to the rear. Tuck flicked his tight gaze along the rough skyline, scanning it long and steadily. Then, slowly, deliberately, he eased his weight back on the seat and chocked his gun back in the holster with a sigh. He removed his white hat, inspecting the small hole in its crown, four inches above the thin black band. He looked at the driver, black brows lifted slightly, mouth askew.

"Close, Bill." He said it dryly. "Just a little bit too close."

CHAPTER TWO

Who Rods This Ranch?

HE DROPPED off the stage at the outer gate of Circle-M Ranch, walked leisurely down the wagon road, casually noting things he might have missed had he hurried more. Soon he came in sight of the low-squatting adobe hacienda which sat on flat ground

with sheds and barns scattered around it like brown chicks around a fat white hen. Tuck passed into a belt of cottonwoods and walnuts that made the park in the center of which the big house stood, and quickened his pace a bit. The saddle was heavy, and he had shifted it three times before he reached this point. And now, standing before the house with its sun-baked dooryard, he dropped the kack at his feet and looked around.

It certainly didn't appear to be a very prosperous spread, though there were indications that it had once seen better days. Now, and he made allowances for it, the flat Texas brown land was parching in the grip of a Southern mid-summer. But the scene was not new or strange to Tuck. He had lived all his life in this prairie-hill-and-timber country, and he loved it well. He pulled in a long breath, though he was not aware of the blistering heat.

Behind the white picket fence that encompassed the dooryard were a few wilted hollyhocks and some yellow roses, and a girl in a blue sunbonnet was tending them with a rusty pair of shears.

She straightened up and smiled when Tuck said, "Howdy, miss." She was tall, young, with a full figure and friendly eyes. Tuck removed his hat respectfully.

"Is Mark Elwood around?"

"You're a stranger here?" It was more a statement of fact than an inquiry.

"That's right."

"Looking for a job?"

He said he was.

"Well, I hope you get it," she said, and he noticed that she wasn't smiling now. "Dad advertised for a manager, but Les Barger raised Ned when he found out."

"I got a letter from your dad, askin' me to come," Tuck said, beginning to fit small things together to make the picture he was bound he'd get. "And—well—I'm here."

"You'll find dad over near the bunkhouse, I think." Now the smile was back, but it was forced. "*Adios.*"

"*Adios,*" he said, and picked up his saddle and ambled on. Crossing the wide yard toward the outbuildings, he saw three Mexican punchers with big hats hunkered down against the bunkhouse wall. They were smoking, paying him no heed.

He met a man a few feet farther on, a young man with gray eyes and blond hair with a shy grin and a soft voice. His face seemed to Tuck to be almost timid as he said, "Mister Elwood's in his office—over there."

"Thanks."

Tuck placed his saddle on the ground, and entered the tin-roofed shack the shy-faced man had pointed to. It was a dusty, bare-walled room, he saw, furnished with a flat-topped

desk and two or three cheap chairs, and faded prints of prize cattle and horses on the wall opposite the door. Behind the desk sat a small, round-shouldered man with a partly bald head and a weary, leathery, grim face.

"I'm Tuck Samson."

Mark Elwood started, recovered his composure with a distinct effort. His faded blue eyes turned wary and alarmed. "I—made a mistake sendin' for yuh, Samson," he stammered out finally. "My foreman, Les Barger, had it all fixed. You see—"

"Then," Tuck said deliberately, "you don't need a man now?"

"Hell, yes!" He put a sudden emphasis on the words, screwing up his face in the manner of a man tasting something bad. "But you wouldn't wanta work for me."

"Reckon I'm the best judge of that, Mister Elwood," said Tuck.

"Well, yes. Only—"

"I'm ready to answer your questions. Fire away," Tuck said.

"I don't believe you'd like it here at Circle-M," Elwood said uncomfortably.

FROM outside came the sound of a rapidly running horse. Elwood started in his chair, then sank back, clenching and unclenching his gnarled hands on the arms of it. Tuck saw a rider pull up at the corrals and dismount hurriedly. It was the man with the yellow eyes who had accosted him in town that afternoon.

While Tuck watched, another horse rushed into the yard from the south—a horse cruelly lathered from galloping in the heat.

A tall, thickset man with a bloated, red face stepped from the saddle—a man big in both weight and girth, powerfully hung, though somewhat awkward in his gait.

Tuck moved against the wall and put his shoulder against it while he rolled up a cigarette. He watched the door through slitted eyes. Boots stamped outside, and the big man lounged into the office. He had brick-colored hair and brows and small, reddish eyes; he wore a low-tied gun and a bowie knife in a whang leather sheath. He had no coat, and his sweat-stained shirt was open at the throat.

"Er—this here's Les Barger, my foreman," Mark Elwood said hesitantly.

Barger was deliberate with his stare, in his cool appraisal of Tuck Samson. Tuck returned that probing look, his own eyes impersonal and vague. For all Barger's eyes told Tuck, however, they might as well have been marbles of cloudy glass. Then the foreman shoved out a horny paw. The iron-hard grip of it was a calculated gesture and one meant to telegraph the power of the man behind it.

Mark Elwood hemmed and hawed. Barger said roughly, "You want to sign him on?"

"I—well, I was considering it," Elwood said weakly. "If you—"

"Sure," the foreman said with exaggerated heartiness. "Why not?"

"You mean—" The old man's mouth was sagging in surprise.

"Good men don't grow on trees!" Barger growled. "We'll try him out."

The three men moved into the ranch yard "We're runnin' about a thousand head right now. Would'a' had plenty more come next round-up, but the damn rustlers have been hittin' us below the belt." The foreman seemed in an expansive mood.

"Why don't you clean the country out?" Tuck suggested casually.

"Mexicans," Barger said. He jerked his head in the direction of the three cowboys squatted against the bunkhouse wall. "They're all in it. When I git the goods on 'em, Samson, I'll clean the bunch out with one sweep." Barger gave Tuck a queer, tight look, then grinned, exposing stained, uneven teeth. "You're a tough 'un, Samson, I been told."

"Yeah," Tuck said, grinning wryly. "I'm so tough I can chew up a bobcat and spit him right out through my teeth!"

Old Man Elwood, silent until now, grinned with a kind of wary optimism. "Shucks," he croaked, "seems good to see somebuddy smile a bit!"

BARGER showed Tuck around the ranch proper, and later brought out a sorrel mare for Tuck to use that afternoon when he made his inspection of the nearby range. At five o'clock he bridled and saddled the horse and cinched her up tight, riding alone toward the south boundary which Barger had said was eight miles from the spread. Circle-M lay in a broad, rolling valley with rocky, timbered hills to east and west, and with a river—the Unadilla—bisecting the range, and with the border twenty miles beyond.

A hot set-up, Tuck thought grimly. A cinch for even a band of common brush-poppers to engineer. Stolen cattle and sleepers could be moved right out of the country in a score of hours.

All along these rolling, grassy hills and flats, on both sides of the valley, Tuck saw scattered cattle grazing. When he rode up close to scout the beef, he saw that almost all the steers were bowed-up old mossyhorns, tough old brush-splitters, worthless except for hide and horns. No tallow, nothing—just coyote bait!

"Poor old Elwood," Tuck said grimly. "He's got a slick-ear workin' on him, all right! And, by hell, he'll bleed him white!"

And still Tuck could not be sure that Barger and Griff Malloy—the man with the yellow eyes—were the men he had sworn to kill.

Barger was not an uncommon name in this section of West Texas. And yet, little things pointed to the possibility that Tuck had ridden down the proper trail. The hulking, red-faced foreman was a hard case, as was his crony, Griff. And old Mark Elwood was patently afraid of both.

After supper in the chuck shack, Tuck said to Barger, "I'll take the job."

"I was hopin' you'd say that, Samson," the foreman grinned. "And I'll do my best to make yuh happy here."

Griff Malloy, sitting across the table, showed Tuck his teeth. "No hard feelin's, pard," he grinned. "Had I knowed the kind of hombre I was talkin' to in town, I'd never of tried to hold yuh up."

Tuck looked around the table, sizing up the crew. There was Barger, Malloy and three Mexican rannies, and there was the young, thin, timid-faced cowboy with the straw-colored hair—Harry Pike.

The meal over, Barger and Malloy rolled out to saddle up and ride to town. The three Mexicans vanished as silently as they had come. Tuck was left alone with Pike. The latter glanced cautiously toward the door, then turned and said, "I been tryin' to get a word with you, Samson. This here's a hell-hole, mister, and you better burn the wind away from it. Barger'll kill you in a week if you stay here."

Tuck smoked calmly. "What about you, Harry?" he asked mildly, blandly. "Where do you fit in?"

Hot color stained Pike's lean cheeks. "I promised Junie that I'd stay," he rasped. "If it wasn't for her I'd light a shuck, you bet!"

"That so?"

Pike's gray eyes went dull. "They keep pushin' me down," he breathed, "hopin' I'll quit and go. Then they'd have Mark and Junie all alone."

"You're seein' spooks," Tuck told him gently. "Grab a fresh holt on the horn or you'll get throwed on your face, brother."

"I ain't spooky, neither," Pike shot back hotly. "I'm tellin' facts. Barger's drove off every good man we had—four of 'em in three weeks—"

"How'd Barger come to get the foreman's job?" Tuck asked.

Pike put his hands on the table, leaning tensely over it. "Him and Malloy rode in two months ago with a thousand bucks apiece. The boss had just spent his roll to restock the ranch, and needed money bad. Barger bought the foreman's job and a blamed good buy it was. After they'd been here a week, they started workin' on Mark, and now they got him skeered to breathe. Why, Samson, him and Junie don't dast to call their souls their own!"

THE following morning Tuck met the girl in the blue sunbonnet for the second time. She emerged from the big house as he was heading down to rustle the pasture; she appeared so promptly that it seemed to him as though she'd been watching for him. He took off his hat and smiled.

"I hear you got the job," she said.

"That's right, Miss Junie," he replied.

"I'm right glad, Tuck."

He asked bluntly, "Is Harry Pike a friend of yours?"

Her face saddened. "Yes, but I don't see him anymore. Harry doesn't dare—he doesn't come near the house."

Tuck smiled quizzically. "Miss him, I s'pose."

"Why, yes," June Elwood said, "I do miss him. But whatever makes you ask?"

"Nothing." He gave her a straight look with admiration in it—admiration of her lithe, strong figure, her level, candid eyes fringed by long dark lashes. "Just makin' talk, is all."

Her eyes clouded. "Who hired you, Tuck?" she asked abruptly. "Barger or Dad?"

"A bit of both, seems like," Tuck answered. "And I think I'm goin' to like it here."

"Oh, I hope so," she said fervently, almost prayerfully.

He left her after that and moved away, his six-gun riding jauntily on his hip as he walked down the path. He saddled up and rode south. He was gone all morning, and when he rode back to the ranch just before dinner time, there was a self-satisfied, almost smug look on his face. He entered the chuck shack just as cookie rang the iron triangle that hung outside the tack room door.

The Mexican hands pulled up quickly to the long board, then Harry Pike came in with a hangdog air, followed closely by Barger and Malloy. Mark Elwood and his daughter ate in the dining room of the big house.

Tuck waited patiently until all hands had finished. Then he dropped his bombshell. "Barger, I found a bunch of young stuff in a box canyon yonder at Totem Rock this morning. Them heifers was corraled as pretty as you please with a basswood pole fence holdin' 'em. Happen to savvy how they got there, friend?"

Silence blanketed the table, drew out interminably and then Barger loudly cleared his throat. His eyes glittered like a cornered coyote's. "Mind cuttin' the deck a little deeper, Tuck? I don't hear so good these days."

Tuck eyed him and said swiftly, "I counted forty cows down there, and that whole strip is chopped plumb to hell with sign. Two men done that fancy-dancin' job."

Barger leaned back and hooked his thumbs over his belt. "Mister," he said with heavy irony, "yuh got good eyes but damn bad judg-

ment!" Tuck, staring at him steadily, felt a reluctant admiration for the foreman's brass-faced nerve. "You forgot what I done told yuh about the Mexicans? You're tippin' my hand, Tuck—tippin' my blasted hand!"

Tuck observed how the three hands attacked their food, with their black eyes pinned on their plates, heedless of the talk that so fatally concerned them. *Poor devils*, Tuck mused; *if they savvy'd how close they are to Campo Santo now they'd leave their pie and line out for Mañana!*

"If they's anything I can't go," Barger was saying scornfully, "it's an hombre that's too damn smart for his pants!" He rose, kicked back his chair, and stomped out of the room.

Griff Malloy, black anger stamped upon his lean, whipped face, sprang up and cried, "Take care how yuh blow that platter mouth o' yours! Your hide ain't made o' boiler plate!" He turned and flung himself out through the chuck house door.

Tuck put his gaze on Harry Pike and winked. The blond cowpoke, pop-eyed with shock, gasped out. "Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord!"

Tuck spent the rest of the day working on Mark Elwood's tally book and ranch accounts. Through layers of tobacco smoke that drifted to and fro he labored, hour after hour, at Elwood's desk. Even when he found that someone had been doctoring the book and altering the ledgers, his expression of stoical calm did not change.

HE MET Les Barger in front of the office at six o'clock. Sunset had come, crimsoning the endless Texas sky. The foreman seemed unaccountably to have forgotten his noontime grudge. "Say, Samson, yuh never told me where yuh hail from?" he boomed.

"I'm a Texas man myself," Tuck told him icily.

"Ever been in Pyramid?" Barger put the question a bit too casually.

"I've been through there."

"Didn't happen to work for a man named Downey, did yuh?"

"No," Tuck said shortly. "I'm a drifter. Downey wouldn't hire a fiddle-footed fool like me."

Barger seemed relieved. "Shore, that's right. I got itchy feet, myself. Wasn't for Miss Junie— That's a purty gal, Tuck."

"What about Harry Pike?"

"Pike?" Scorn, contempt, underlined the word. "He ain't wuth a bag o' shucks! A yellor-bellied pup!"

The next morning, Tuck went to the office and found old Mark there ahead of him. While they were speaking in low tones, Les Barger came in. He had June Elwood firmly by the arm. Tuck nodded briefly to Barger and the girl; then said to Elwood, "As I was sayin',

Mark, you're a thousand five hundred short on the cash book. And I made a quick count of the beef yesterday. Not figurin' on the west forty herd, you're missin' about four hundred head—all the fat stuff you had this spring."

There was a silence—a silence loaded with potential dynamite—and then Mark Elwood's grim face broke into a smile. "By Jove, Samson," he cried, "you're a smart one! The best man that ever hit this spread!"

Tuck cut in with, "Just how much authority have I got?"

"Yuh ain't got a helluva lot!" The foreman had moved up and was standing belligerently in front of Tuck, staring at him darkly. "You keep them books, and leave me run this spread."

Tuck stared through him. He spoke to the girl who had drawn aside, her face emotionless and pale. He said, "I'd sure admire to call on you tonight, Miss June."

The girl gave a start; then recovered herself. "I'd love you to, Tuck," she said with quick eagerness. "It would be wonderful."

Mark Elwood took his daughter's arm and led her out. Les Barger watched them go; then sidled up to Tuck and said, "Look, pard, you better stick to business while you're here."

"Yeah?" Tuck considered the remark with deep and careful thought; then said, "I'll think it over, Les."

"Yuh could do worse," Barger said. Tuck smelled the whisky on his breath.

After supper that night, Tuck curried his clothes until every stitch and threadbare seam stood out. He was aware that Barger and Malloy, pretending to sleep, watched him covertly from under lowered lids. From their bunks where they lay, boots off, no sound came, and this was the tip-off. He left the building presently and walked across the yard and knocked at the front door of the big house.

Junie came out, remnants of tears still streaking the smooth planes of her cheeks. Tuck followed her into the living room. "Anything wrong?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"I—I had an argument with dad," she told him frankly. "He wants me to marry Les Barger."

Tuck had a bad taste in his mouth. "So?"

Fresh moisture appeared in Junie's eyes, and he had the sudden conviction that she was thinking about Harry Pike. *Poor girl*, he thought with genuine pity. *She sure is in a tight.*

The room was pleasant, with horsehair chairs and a sofa, and a large marble-topped table. Mark Elwood drifted in then, his pale eyes staring vacantly in front of him. He hardly spoke. Junie was dressed in the latest style of shirtwaist and wide-flounced skirt. Suddenly her eyes began to shine.

Tuck sat with his white hat on his knees until she came and took it from him and pegged it behind the door. Almost at once the front door shook under the assault of a heavy fist. Les Barger came in, his face a dour mask, reddish eyes sullen and resentfully holding on Tuck where he sat in silence by the fireplace. He took no part in the conversation which now seemed strained and forced; it was plain that Barger was inept at the social graces.

Junie played the mandolin rather well, and she sang in a clear cool soprano. At nine o'clock, Tuck rose to leave, and Les Barger stood up and moved toward the door, hat in hand, his face like a storm cloud.

"It's been nice, Tuck," Junie said, smiling at him and seeming happy now for the first time in days.

"I tried to get Harry to come," Tuck said. "But he had some work to do."

"Come again," the girl invited.

"Tomorrow night?"

"Why, yes. Please do."

Barger had slid out first into the darkened yard, and when Tuck reached him, a moment later, the foreman was waiting in the menacing quiet. Barger shoved something into Tuck's hand, adding his growled-out words: "You're fired, Samson. That's your pay for a week. It's my own money. If you're here in the mornin' I'll be mighty pleased to cut your damn heart out!"

CHAPTER THREE

Fists Before Six-guns

SUDDEN cold reasoning prevented Tuck from slapping the greenbacks into Barger's face and following them with his fist. He stood a moment, not speaking, then wheeled and stalked toward the bunkhouse at the rim of the yard. By lamplight, he examined the three new crisp ten-dollar notes the foreman had just given him. The seed of a thought lay in those certificates, and he pondered over them for a little while, then found paper and an envelope and spent some time with a pen which wasn't meant to write with. Afterward, he peeled off his shirt and boots and hit the hay.

He rolled out at dawn, before Barger and Malloy had returned from their binge in town. The two cronies had spent more time in Conestota lately than at the ranch. The first thing Tuck did when breakfast was finally over was to dispatch Juan, one of the hands, to town to post the letter he had written the night before. This accomplished, he headed for Elwood's office.

It came as a mild shock when he found three men there before him. They were: Elwood, Harry Pike, and Les Barger himself. The

trio stared at Tuck speechlessly as he walked in. Pike's thin face twitched and he tried to project a friendly grin and failed. Elwood stared. Les Barger's bloated face was a mask of hate.

"Morning, boys," Tuck greeted them in his dry voice.

The foreman was the first to recover, but he choked on his own words: "I warned yuh to shag out, Samson!" He said no more, but deliberately drew the bowie knife from its leather nest. Old Man Elwood let go with a strangled cry, and flung himself at Barger, grabbing the foreman's arm and hanging to it desperately. "Don't, Les! Don't—"

Barger shook him off as easily as if the old man were a child. Swinging about, Tuck planted his back against the wall. He did not make a motion toward his gun. Harry Pike side-stepped against the opposite wall, eyes round and staring wildly from his head.

The foreman paused, watching Tuck. He was patently giving his man a chance to hit the breeze. Tuck never stirred, never spoke, never blinked an eye.

Finally Barger flung his snarling threat: "I was mebbe exaggeratin' some when I said I'd cut your heart out, friend! I'm on'y gonna carve yuh up a bit!"

He sprang, clumsy and lead-footed, and Tuck side-stepped. As he did, he flung up a hand and cuffed Barger in the face with his open palm. The sound was as sharp as a pistol shot.

The foreman brought up as suddenly as though he had run against a wall, and that was Tuck's cue to seize his wrist and bend it down and back. Barger roared out in pain, and the knife clattered at his feet. Tuck kicked it across the room and, not speaking, hit the foreman with his fist—three lightning blows that cracked the big man's head back on his shoulders and dropped him where he stood. Barger struck the floor with a crash that shook the office to its beam-ends.

Elwood and Pike stood rigid, staring, open-mouthed.

Tuck walked out without a backward glance. He did not see Barger or Malloy again that day.

In company with the three Mexican cowboys, he rode Elwood's range all afternoon, rounding up strays and fresh-dropped calves, and shagging them into the big holding corral on the flats below the ranch.

THAT night he merely dozed, with one eye open and his ears cocked for trouble if it should come. His gun was on the straw-stack tick beside him.

The next morning, Juan reported that Barger and Malloy were still in town, dead drunk.

On the third day after the row in Elwood's

office Barger and his pard rode in at breakfast time.

They were cold-sober now, though bleary and puffy about the face. Both men ate in the kitchen, then vanished. Some time later, Juan trotted in and left his horse, and found Tuck in the office. He held out a letter post-marked at Pyramid.

Tuck read it with a building satisfaction. That afternoon he cleaned and oiled his gun, reloaded it.

Night came. Tuck ate a light supper alone with Harry Pike and the Mex hands, then sat on the bunkhouse bench. Lights sprang on over at the big house, and once Junie Elwood came out on the gallery and stared across the dust to where he sat motionlessly. He realized he hadn't seen her or talked to her since the night Barger had threatened him and paid him off.

At nine o'clock he dropped his smoke and ground it out.

He rose then and stretched lazily and headed swiftly for the house. He knocked softly and was admitted by the girl without delay. She was reaching to take his hat when a voice outside called Mark Elwood's name.

The girl stiffened, lips parted in a strained and listening look. The voice came again, and it was Lester Barger's: "Mark! We wanta talk to yuh!"

She gave a moaning cry and darted for a gun rack in the corner.

In an instant she had lifted a rifle from it, and made for the front door.

"Wait!"

Tuck pulled his shoulders up and followed her out to the shadowed gallery. He halted near the door, his face screened by the hemming dark.

Barger and Malloy stooy together out in the yard, now illumined by the newly risen moon. They were on foot, but they held the bridle reins of their horses, their beard-stubbed face raised so the light from the house shone full upon their grim, determined features.

There was a third horse, Tuck saw upon it Juan sat dejectedly, and there was a noose looped slackly around his neck, and his sombrero dangled against his back, suspended by its bonnet thongs. His arms were tied behind his back.

June Elwood held her rifle out in front of her as she came forward against the gallery rail.

"Take that rope off Juan," she commanded. "Take it off, Les! Quickly!"

Barger hurled a blustering retort at her. "Where's your old man? We wanta talk to him!"

Tuck pulled aside, deeper into shadow and saw Mark Elwood standing there. The old

man called, "What's goin' on, Junie? Where's everybuddy?"

And then, suddenly he saw the Mexican, and breath gusted out of him explosively. He stumbled out on the gallery, clutching the railing.

Barger said, "He's your man, Mark. He's been stealin' yuh deef, dumb and blind! We're goin' to string him up!"

There was no trace of fear in Elwood's voice as he leaned forward, crying, "You're a liar, Les! You and Malloy are tryin' to cover up your own dirty, thievin' tricks!"

Barger's answer was to move suddenly against Juan's horse.

He quickly grabbed up the end of the rope and jerked it tight. Then he tossed the trailing strand over the limb of a cottonwood growing near the porch.

"Drop that rope!" June laid her voice on him as though it were a club. She raised the rifle to her shoulder.

Her father groaned. "It ain't loaded, Junie! My God—"

The girl swayed, and eased the weapon down. Tuck saw her admiringly. She was straight and slender and strong as a post-oak sapling.

In a moment, she spoke again. "Les, let Juan go. If he's done wrong he ought to be in jail."

"Jail's too good for him!" Barger flung back in a savage undertone. "He's goin' to play cat's cradle with his neck, that's what he is!"

"Let him go, Les!" She threw her words at him.

"Mind me!"

Barger laughed and was echoed promptly by Griff Malloy.

The Mexican remained sitting stiffly in the saddle, head bent, eyes closed. The girl left the gallery then and rushed at Barger, but he saw her coming and lifted an arm and thrust her back so violently that she stumbled and almost fell.

Tuck chose that moment to move out. He dropped cat-like from the gallery, saying, "Put down that rope, Barger."

Barger whirled, staring, and so did Griff Malloy. A maddened brightness showed in the eyes of both.

But Barger, slowly and quite deliberately allowed the end of the lariat to slide through his fingers to the ground. Both men held their tense positions, twenty feet from the one they hated and feared.

Tuck stood still and said, "Your loop's run out, boys. I got what I been waitin' for—the proof that you murdered my brother Bob!"

The foreman's shoulders seemed to shrink; he put his shocked gaze on Malloy's white face, then snapped it back to Tuck's. He did not speak, but let the silence draw out thin and tight.

Tuck spoke then with no intonation: "When you paid me off the other night, Barger, you done it with three new bills. Well, I mailed 'em to the bank in Pyramid that bought my brother's ranch, and today I got word back."

He paused, letting the breathy silence give full impact to his words. "Those bills was part of the cash the bank paid my brother for our ranch!"

Barger's slab-like cheeks were streaked

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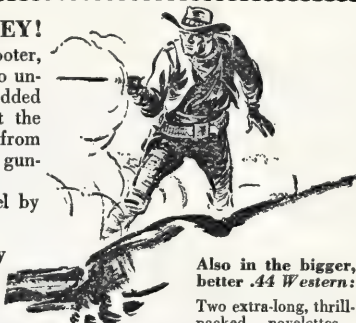
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with clotted blood; his eyes had the cold dead stare of a rattlesnake's.

When he spoke again Tuck's voice turned thin, remote: "And now I'm goin' to kill you both!"

Barger pulled in a deep, shaken breath, then drew his burly shoulders back. He said nothing, but started forward, walking stiffly toward Tuck.

Malloy, white-faced and staring, hesitated; then he, too, began to move.

"Stand fast!" Tuck ordered coldly, harshly.

The two men stopped, their eyes never stirring from their adversary's mask-like face. Tuck said, "Draw, Barger! Draw your gun!"

The foreman faced Tuck head-on, his mouth twitching. June Elwood, standing a little to one side, watched Tuck and never noticed the bulging eyes of the blocky foreman, or the way his arms crooked at the elbow. In Tuck's eyes was a pale, cold flame. Heretofore they had been quiet, impersonal, under the brim of his old white hat, but now there wasn't any color there at all—just a cold, merciless, hungry light.

Les Barger, halting, called up his bluster and all his bluff. "Git out, Samson! We'll give yuh one more chance!" He waited for Tuck's reply, but there was only silence. From the mask-like face before him he knew that Tuck Samson was the tougher man and could not be kicked around by big words or driven off this ranch.

Then desperately Barger clawed down for his gun.

It had barely cleared its holster when the slap of Tuck's palm against the butt of his gun made a flat, dead sound in the night—he squeezed the trigger as the barrel slid from the leather, and his draw was a shade faster than the foreman's, for he heard the big man's bullet fan past his cheek at the same moment his own gun's echo slammed across the yard.

Les Barger let out a thin, bleating cry, and let his weapon fall, clutching at his middle. He went down slowly, pitching flat on his face in the inch-deep dust.

The red dust boiled up about him as he lay there, still.

Griff Malloy didn't even try to draw his gun. He whipped himself around and grabbed for the trailing reins of his bay. He was turned sideways and was swinging up as Tuck's gun spoke out again. He went rigid, one boot caught in the stirrup. He gave a mighty grunting lunge and tried to heave his stringy body into the saddle and failed.

Tuck's slug drove the wind out of him in a gust. He fell backward like a tree cut down and toppling, and hit the ground so hard his body bounced. Then he, too, lay still, face pointed placidly toward the starry Texas sky.

"I 'LL take my time if you don't mind," Tuck said calmly. He was facing Old Man Elwood in the living room of the big adobe house, and June stood there, watching him with sober, troubled eyes.

Only an hour ago, the marshal from Conestota had taken the bodies of Barger and Malloy away.

Harry Pike lounged against the fireplace, an admiring grin on his pale face. Mark Elwood stared, astonished. He said, "Take your time? Why, Tuck, yuh ain't gonna leave us now, I hope."

"I'll be movin' on, I guess," Tuck said un-
easily.

"Got itchy feet, seems like. Besides, I only took the job so I could clean the slate for my brother Bob."

"But"—distress marked the old man's face—"we figured yuh was gonna stay and help us build the spread again."

Tuck smiled. "A man like me never thinks about the ground under his own feet. He worries about what lays over the next hill."

"Junie'd be mighty pleased to have yuh stay," the old rancher said persistently.

"No, thanks," Tuck wondered what the old man meant by that last remark. And he was thinking about Junie Elwood, and his thoughts were not impersonal at all. She'd make a perfect cowman's wife. It wouldn't be too hard for him to stay and speak his piece and take her answer. But, shucks, it would mean stealing her away from Harry Pike! He'd be damned if he'd do that! Besides, his feet were getting itchy now.

"I'll take my time," he said again, a stubbornness on his face. He shot his gaze to Harry Pike.

Seeing the look, Harry Pike's mouth dropped open, and he forgot to close it. "Yuh must be loco," he said when he finally found his tongue.

"Junie ain't my gal. She's jest my friend. I been stayin' here because she asked me to—to side her pappy in this tight."

Tuck's eyes drifted slowly over to Junie's face, and they opened in slow awareness, wonder-filled, comprehending. . . .

"Well, I'll be switched!" he breathed. "What a knot-head I turned out to be!"

But June Elwood still stood aloof, head lifted haughtily, chin firm and straight; then suddenly her breath was coming sharp and fast, and two spots of rosy color bloomed in her sun-tanned cheeks. "Never mind," she said in a trembling voice. "I—we can get along without you very well."

"The heck you can!" The grin was back on Tucker Samson's face again. His hazel eyes were crinkling deeply at the corners as he said, "Harry, you can go and hang my saddle up!"

Gun Might Makes Right!

THERE was no one in sight as Pete Mason rode up to Hank Robbins' little homestead. That was funny because Hank had four kids who were always raising an uproar.

Pete grinned to himself as he swung out of the saddle. Maybe Mrs. Robbins had gotten them to take that afternoon nap they were supposed to take, but never did. He started for the little cabin when he heard the creak of saddle-leather behind the barn and stepped that way.

He found Hank saddling a horse.

"Hi, Hank," Pete said cheerfully.

The homesteader swung around, his work-narled hand making a clumsy grab for a big Navy Colt stuck in his waistband.

Pete frowned. There were beads of sweat standing out on Hank's forehead; a desperate look in the man's eyes.

"Oh—uh, hello, Pete," Hank muttered, then.

He licked his lips and took his hand off the gun. Pete noticed the butt was wet with sweat from Hank's hand.

He leaned his lanky bulk against the barn and built a smoke. "Wondered if I could borrow your mower," he said. "That timothy o' mine's getting—"

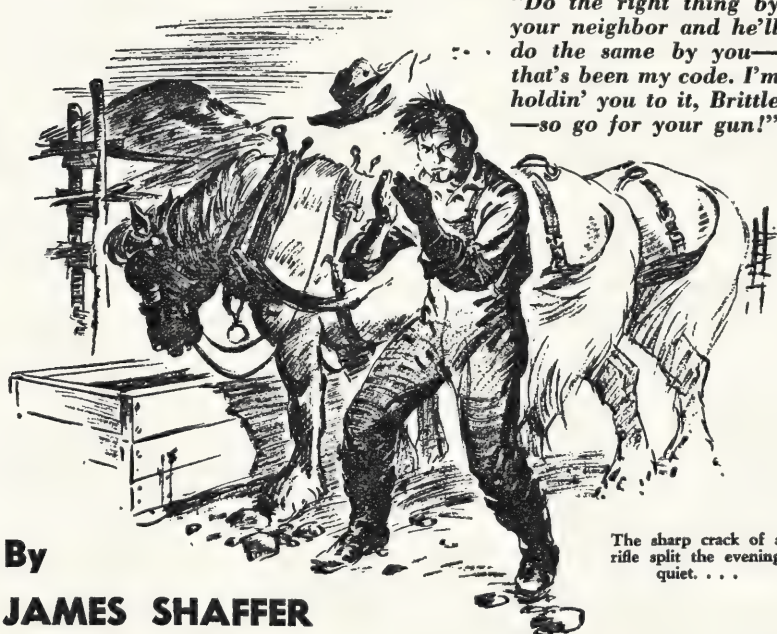
"Yeah, yeah, sure," Hank seemed in a hurry and irritable. "You can have it—in fact, it's yours."

"Huh?"

Hank's hands were busy, saddling the work horse. "Yeah, it's yours. I'm leaving—uh—got a good business opportunity—down south of here."

Pete took a long drag on his smoke. He knew of Hank Robbins' trouble with the powerful Double Link ranch adjoining Robbins' homestead. He knew of it, and couldn't understand it. His own philosophy was live and let live. Do the right thing by your neighbor,

"Do the right thing by your neighbor and he'll do the same by you—that's been my code. I'm holdin' you to it, Brittle—so go for your gun!"



The sharp crack of a rifle split the evening quiet. . . .

By

JAMES SHAFFER

and he'd do the right thing by you. Hank's homestead included Dead Indian Springs, and there were times when Jake Brittle's cattle needed water. But Pete was sure that if Hank had done the right thing, he'd had no trouble with the Double Link owner.

"Sold your homestead?" Pete asked finally.

"Uh—no. Figuring on selling it later."

"If you ain't already got a bid on it, I'd like to buy it," Pete said suddenly. "I could give you my check on the bank, and you could stop by and get your money—"

Hank whirled around to face him. "You don't want this place, Pete." His voice was hoarse, and his big hands clenched and unclenched. "You don't want it, you hear me?"

Pete laughed. "What I want and don't want is my funeral, Hank. How much?"

"All right," Hank said at last, slowly. "If you want it, it's yours." In sudden, clumsy haste he swung into the saddle.

"Wait a minute," Pete said. "Wouldn't be right not to pay you something. Here, I'll write you a check, and you write me a bill of sale."

Hank hesitated, glancing around nervously. "All right," he said finally, dropping to the ground again. He scrawled out a bill of sale and thrust it at Pete. He didn't even look at the check, just jammed it in his pocket, mounted and rode off.

Pete shrugged and strolled over to the cabin. It was empty, except for a few odds and ends, and showed signs of a hasty departure. In the middle of the living room floor was Hank Robbins' work hat. Pete picked it up.

There was a neat little bullet hole through the crown.

IT WAS a couple of days after the purchase before Pete rode into town. He rode down the dusty main street and pulled up at the bank. Leo Gantry was bent over his ledger as Pete stepped through the front door. He looked up, but his customary cordial greeting was lacking. He nodded briefly and bent over his books once more. Pete shrugged. Maybe Leo had troubles.

"Did Hank Robbins cash one of my checks, the last day or so?" Pete asked.

Leo looked up quickly. "He tried to, but I wouldn't cash it."

"What's the matter?" Pete asked, surprised and angered. "I've got plenty to cover."

Leo stood up and came over to the window. "I thought you might want to reconsider the matter, and stop payment on the check." He added quickly, "I could arrange it—if you wanted to stop payment."

Pete knit his brows, perplexed. "Why should I want to stop payment? Pay the check when it's presented."

"It's for payment on Robbins' homestead."

Pete nodded. "That's what I wrote it for."

Leo leaned forward, and his voice dropped. "Do you know why Robbins pulled out? Do you know why he sent his family on ahead of him, then rode out of here one night?"

Pete remembered the neat little hole in Hank's old work hat. And he was remembering the look of cunning satisfaction he'd seen on Jake Brittle's face one Saturday afternoon.

Jake Brittle had killed a man that day. The man had stepped out of the Drover's Saloon, yelled Brittle's name and gone for his gun. Brittle had been faster.

But, of course, that had been self-defense. The sheriff had said so, and everybody had seen the man go for his gun first.

Pete shrugged. He'd bought Hank Robbins' homestead—not Hank Robbins' troubles.

"Just let the check go through, Leo," he said and walked out. He went over to the county clerk's office, took out the bill of sale and laid it on the counter before Jeb Adams. The county clerk picked it up, then dropped it quickly.

"Leo Gantry said if you tried to file this, for me to send you over to see him."

"I've already seen him," Pete said sharply. "I went by the bank to see if Hank had cashed my check."

Jeb adjusted the green eyeshade a trifle and peered at the bill of sale through his glasses. "And you still want to file it?" He sounded surprised.

"Yes, yes, of course!" Pete snapped.

Jeb dragged out the county deed book and dipped his pen in the ink. He squinted up at Pete. "You know, I won't be able to keep Jake Brittle from finding out who owns Hank's homestead. And he'll be wanting to know—soon's he finds out Hank's gone."

Pete didn't say anything. Jeb hesitated a trifle longer, then his pen scratched and squeaked as he recorded the bill of sale.

"You may be smart at that," Jeb murmured, as Pete turned away. "Jake might figure it cheaper to pay your price—than to raise a ruckus. He's been known to have weak moments."

Pete grunted and kept on going. He was getting sick of this.

He'd heard the tales about Jake Brittle running things to suit himself, but Pete hadn't had any trouble with either Jake or his foreman, Lago Durm.

He'd sold fresh eggs to the Double Link ranch, and had played poker in the Drover's saloon with Durm. Lago had joked about losing a few dollars and Pete had bought drinks with his winnings.

He started for the Golden West Restaurant. He was thinking how nice it would be to have a piece of apple pie and talk to Gracie Walker while he was eating it—then he saw Lago

Durm's big black horse in front of the Drover's.

He grinned. Might as well show Leo and Jeb how wrong they were, once and for all. He turned into the Drover's. Lago was against the bar, and Pete half-wished he hadn't come. The foreman had a skinful.

"What's this I hear about Hank Robbins trying to cash your check around town?" Durm growled. "They say it was for his homestead."

"It was," Pete said.

Lago flung his drink at Pete. The whiskey splashed across his shirt front. "You dirty, sneaking sodbuster!" the foreman sneered. "I'll teach you to buck the Double Link!"

Pete leaped. Lago was drawing, but whiskey made him fumble. Pete twisted the gun away from him and tossed it in a corner. Lago snarled an oath and swung. Pete ducked easily. Durm lurched back against the bar, then hurled himself at Pete, a naked knife gleaming in his hand.

Pete hit him then—hard. His fist slammed solidly against Lago's chin. The foreman's eyes glazed momentarily; then he came on again. Pete swung again, and Lago slithered full length in the sawdust.

Pete glanced at the awed onlookers as he straightened his clothes, and adjusted his hat. "When he sobers up reckon he'll feel differently about it," he said and walked out.

HE HAD a drink at the hotel bar; then strolled toward the Golden West. He'd always found it easy to talk to Gracie Walker about things that didn't matter, about the weather, the crops, and how the fish were biting. It was when he tried to talk of other things—about the new cabin he was building, and how her hair looked when the sun fell on it—that he got all balled up. Those things stuck in his throat—but he kept trying.

She saw him coming and had his pie already cut when he came in; but she wasn't smiling. She looked worried, and when he sat down, she laid a hand on his arm.

"Pete, you didn't buy Hank Robbins' homestead, did you?" Her tone was that of a person who knows and dreads the answer, but can't help asking the question.

Pete hacked off a chunk of the pie, and paused with it halfway to his lips. "If Hank Robbins couldn't get along with his neighbors, it's no skin off my nose. I've always gotten along." Again he felt the chip on his shoulder that he'd put there when he first stepped into the bank. And it made him mad in a way he couldn't explain. He didn't want to argue with Gracie!

"You've never had Jake Brittle as a neighbor," she said quietly, and there was hurt in her eyes. "Brittle doesn't like neighbors, and

Lago Durm sees that he doesn't have many."

Pete grinned. He told her how Lago had come at him with a knife—how he'd laid the foreman out.

The girl's face went white. "Oh, Pete! Get right over to Brittle's—now—before Lago gets there. Sell that homestead to him at his own price. If Brittle drives a hard bargain with you it'll satisfy him—and he'll keep Lago from bothering you."

The muscles along his jaw tightened, and his jaw jutted out. There was a stubborn beligerence in his voice.

"I'm not selling Hank Robbins' place. I bought it for my own use, and I'm keeping it."

"You saw Jake Brittle kill a man?"

"Brittle had no other choice," Pete said coldly. "I saw the whole thing. The man called Brittle's hand and went for his gun first. But I won't do anything like that."

"Suppose Brittle calls your hand?"

"He'll have no cause to do that." Pete paused. "And if he should threaten me—he'll answer to the sheriff."

But suddenly he was thinking of the hole in Hank's hat.

TWO days ago," Jake Brittle was saying in a dry, clipped voice, "you filed a bill of sale for Hank Robbins' homestead. Also, you picked on my foreman and beat him up when he was too drunk to defend himself."

Pete felt his face getting red. He didn't look at the rancher. He let his gaze rove over his own homestead and across the fence to the homestead that had lately belonged to Hank Robbins. This was his land and he was determined to keep it without a fight. He swung around then, and faced Brittle who sat his horse outside Pete's little cabin.

"I want to be a good neighbor, Brittle," he said mildly, "since our land adjoins. And I was kinda hoping you was on a friendly visit when I seen you riding up."

Brittle rasped. "I want Dead Indian Springs—I need that water!"

Pete nodded. "We could make a deal. I'd do the right thing by you."

Brittle laughed, his thin lips drawing back over his sharp teeth.

"Me make a deal with a squatter! Yeah, I might at that—my kind of deal!"

Pete built a cigarette and touched a match to it. "Listen, Brittle, if you want to set down and make a fair and square deal to water your cattle at Dead Indian Springs, I'm willing. We could make the deal and get along fine together. But bluster and threats ain't gonna get you nowhere."

Brittle's eyes narrowed. Without a word he swung his mount around, jabbed his spurs cruelly and galloped off. Pete watched him go,

a vague resentment within him growing stronger as the rancher grew smaller in the distance.

His gaze swung toward Hank Robbins' homestead. His homestead, now. And he meant to keep it. Jake Brittle might do a lot of blustering and threatening, but this time he wasn't dealing with Hank Robbins. He shrugged and started toward the barn. There was that timothy to be mowed.

He was tired when night came, and the weariness seemed to lessen the resentment against Jake Brittle's harsh words. He unhitched the team and led them to the water trough as dusk settled over the valley.

The sharp crack of a rifle split the quiet evening. Pete stood stock still for a long moment, conscious that the night breeze was ruffling his hair. He tossed the match away, and bent down to retrieve his hat.

Carefully, like a man who has rehearsed a part in a play, he dusted it off, and then poked his finger through a fresh bullet hole in the high crown. . . .

At high noon the next day he rode into town. He racked his mount in front of the saloon and walked up the rough board walk, twisted the door-knob and stepped into Sheriff Wireman's office.

"Yeah?" There was annoyance on the lawman's face as he peered over the week-old paper he was reading.

"Jake Brittle's trying to start trouble with me over Hank Robbins' homestead."

"What'd you expect?" the lawman snapped.

"I don't know what I expected of Jake Brittle—but I know what I expect of you!" Pete said testily.

The sheriff's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "What?" he demanded.

"I'm as much a citizen as Jake Brittle is," Pete went on. "You're paid to keep law and order in this county. I'm expecting you to earn your pay."

Wireman's neck grew red. "What kind of trouble, exactly, have you had with Brittle?"

Pete swept his hat from his head and pointed to the bullet hole in the crown.

"Who put that there?"

"Why, Jake Brittle—or Lago Durm—one or the other."

Sheriff Wireman's eyes narrowed. "Yuh mean you didn't see who took a pot shot at you?"

"It was almost dark. But it must'a been—"

The sheriff said hotly, "That evidence ain't enough to arrest a jackrabbit on! How do I know you ain't trying to pull a sandy on me—shot that hole in your hat yourself—then tried to git Brittle arrested for it."

"I didn't ask you to arrest nobody!" Pete said. "I'm just telling you—I don't want to have no trouble with Brittle's Double Link

spread—and if any trouble starts, I'm expecting you to stop it!"

PETE strode out, figuring on getting right back to his homestead, but there was a quick flurry of steps behind him, and Gracie Walker took hold of his arm. Her face was drawn and pinched with worry.

"What'd you see the sheriff about?" she asked.

"Uh—oh, nothing much," Pete muttered. He laid his hat on the counter, and wished he hadn't. The girl's eyes caught the fresh bullet hole.

"Pete!"

"Aw, now, don't start worrying," he said gruffly.

"Brittle?" She inclined her head toward the hat.

"Him or Lago," Pete nodded. "But this time they ain't dealing with Hank Robbins. Hank's mistake was that he kept his troubles to himself. I don't aim to."

"Pete, I'm scared."

"Aw, now, don't start that." He patted her arm clumsily. And all of a sudden, he wasn't scared to talk to her any more. The words tumbled out of his mouth, as he told her of his plans and ambitions and about the cabin he was building, with the spare room, and all. A customer would drift in and Pete would wait impatiently until he'd left, then start in where he'd left off.

It took an hour for him to talk himself out, and then he stood up, self-conscious and blushing. "Gotta be going," he said hurriedly, grabbed his hat and dashed for the door.

He felt all warm and happy inside, as he strode up the street to his horse. He was thinking how nice it was going to be when he got both homesteads producing and bringing in money.

Then a man could ask a girl to marry him. He could build that extra room for the kids and buy all the fancy doodads a woman wanted to put in a house. A man could—

"Mason!" The dry, flat tone of the word fell across Pete's thoughts like a bucket of icy water. He jerked his gaze toward the speaker.

Jake Brittle lounged in the doorway of the saloon, a thumb hooked suggestively in the sagging gunbelt around his middle.

"Well?" The one word slipped past the tight muscles of his throat. Jake Brittle strolled indolently toward him. Pete balanced on the balls of his feet, fighting his impulse to back up before the rancher. He was conscious of the sagging weight of the gun on his own hip—a gun fired only a few times—never at a man.

He'd seen Jake Brittle kill a man with that gun on his hip. . . .

The rancher came up close, then stopped.

There was a cold glitter in Brittle's eyes that Pete had never seen before; a cruel set to the thin lips.

"You got till sundown to be out of town, Mason."

Sundown—out of town! Pete wanted to ask why, but he knew that would sound foolish, because he knew why. He knew now why Hank Robbins had been in such a hurry that morning.

"You don't want this place, Pete," Hank had said. "You don't want it, hear?"

That wasn't true. Pete did want it. And Hank had wanted it. Hank had been proud of his homestead—the way he'd built it up, the way he'd made a home for his family. Hank hadn't wanted it bad enough to fight for it, though.

And now he, Pete Mason, owned the same place and he wanted to make a home for Gracie Walker out there—a place they could both call home.

"Till sundown—" Jake Brittle repeated softly. He turned casually and strolled back into the saloon. Pete could see through the dirty glass of the saloon window. He saw Lago Durm grin as his boss came in, and hand him a filled whiskey glass.

Sundown! Pete twisted around and squinted. About mid-afternoon. Three, maybe four hours left.

He turned and looked at the sheriff's office down the street, while thoughts ran through his head.

This was no job for a sheriff. This was supposed to be settled—just him and Brittle. Brittle had made it a personal matter, and men didn't go running to the law in a case

like this. A man did one of two things. He rode out of town, or he walked out into the street, by himself at sundown, and made as quick a grab for his gun as he could.

BUT WHY? Why should he try to beat Brittle in a shoot-out? He was no gunman. No. It wasn't right. It wasn't right that Hank Robbins had had to leave; or that the other man had had to die in the street one Saturday afternoon. It was time somebody did the right thing about Jake Brittle. He turned toward the sheriff's office.

The door was locked. He peered in the window. The office was empty. He walked over to the livery stable across the street.

"Seen the sheriff around?" he asked the hostler.

The man nodded. "Rode out of town about an hour ago. Didn't say where he was going. Something about a hot tip on some owlhooters. Said he wouldn't be back till late tomorrow. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," Pete said mechanically. "Nothing at all."

So that was it! This was why the sheriff hadn't interfered that Saturday afternoon, when Brittle had killed a man in cold blood. And this was why Hank Robbins had left. Pete had known Brittle was a power in the county, but he hadn't suspected that he swung this much weight.

He had no doubts now but what Brittle had told the sheriff to get out of town until this thing was over. The same thing had probably happened to Hank Robbins.

Without quite knowing how, Pete found himself back in the Golden West Restaurant.



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"Lago was bragging about it, even before Brittle saw you," Gracie said. "Oh, Pete—it isn't right!"

"Brittle thinks it's the right thing to do," Pete answered. "And with his gunspeed—" His voice trailed off.

"Pete—" The girl was hesitant, half afraid, "We'll go away—where there isn't any Jake Brittle, some place where we can start over again—"

He didn't answer, just sat there, staring straight ahead. The girl hurried around the counter.

"I can be ready in an hour or two." She was slipping her apron off—"Won't take me but a little while to pack." She was putting her hat on, tucking in a stray wisp of hair here and there. When he didn't reply, she came over to him quickly.

"Pete—you will leave with me, won't you? You wouldn't—you aren't thinking of—oh, Pete, you'd be killed!"

"All right," he said heavily. "We'd better go. Reckon that's the right thing to do."

"I'll be back in a few minutes," she said and was gone. Pete stared at the counter.

The right thing to do. The phrase kept running through his mind like some crazy sing-song. The right thing. That was his philosophy of living. He'd always done the right thing by other people. That was the way he'd lived. That was his creed.

His lip curled. A helluva lot it had gotten him. A helluva lot it had gotten Hank Robbins. Here he was running just like Hank had—like a cur dog with its tail between its legs. Slinking out of town because it was the right thing to do.

He looked down the dusty main street. Only a few hours ago, he'd been picturing himself riding down that street in a spanking new buggy, with Gracie on the seat beside him, and him holding his head up like a man. And now he was getting ready to sneak out of town like a yellow coyote.

The right thing, hell! Jake Brittle never did the right thing—and Jake Brittle was the most powerful man in the county. Pete's creed, he decided, had been all right, but it didn't mean anything to a man like Brittle.

Pete put his hat on and walked out the front door, leaving the Golden West deserted. He walked down the street toward the general store, fingering the few grimy bills in his pants pockets.

The bills were a tight ball in his fist when he walked into the store. Jim Maddox looked up.

"You had a second-hand shotgun for sale a few days ago. Still got it?"

Maddox nodded wordlessly, but his eyes were intent on the young homesteader's face.

"Twelve dollars I believe you priced it,"

Pete said, and dropped some bills on the counter. "I'll need some shells—one box. Buckshot."

"I heard about—" the storekeeper's voice trailed off. He moved away. "I'll get the gun."

Pete's hand closed over the smooth, cool steel of the barrel. He broke the box of shells, and dumped them into his coat pocket. Then he strode toward the back of Maddox's store and slipped out the back door.

He started up the alley, the same alley that ran past the back door of the Drover's Saloon. As he walked, he broke the gun open, fumbled in his pocket for the shells and slipped a load into each barrel.

Then the odor of sawdust and whiskey and stale tobacco smoke reached his nostrils, and he was at the back door of the saloon. He gripped the shotgun tightly, slipped his finger through the trigger guard, and kicked the door open.

There was a bunch at the bar. A noisy, roistering bunch that clustered around Jake Brittle and Lago Durm.

"Scatter!" Pete roared. "It's Durm and Brittle I'm after!"

He saw the bunch break and scatter like startled quail; and was conscious of the fact that Brittle and his foreman were together at the bar, their startled faces toward him. He jerked the gun to his shoulder. The saloon rocked and rattled under the thunderous explosions.

Then Pete was flinging the shotgun from him; was dropping to one knee and clawing for the gun at his hip. Through the haze of smoke, he saw Durm and Brittle dragging their guns, heard the roar as they fired and felt the sickening slam of lead in his body.

Then somehow his own gun was out. He was down on both knees now—holding onto the floor to keep it from slipping up and hitting him in the face, and his gun was flaming.

"I'll do the right thing by you, Brittle!" He knew he was yelling, and he knew that his words were being drowned out by gunfire. But he'd felt like he had to yell those words. . . .

It was long after dark when the doctor left, and he and Gracie were alone. The Doc had grinned and said he'd be back tomorrow. Pete was swathed in bandages, and the room reeked with the pungent smell of medicines.

"I wasn't getting anywhere with my philosophy of life," he mumbled. "Doing the right thing was getting me a kick in the ribs like a cur dog. Figured I'd try Brittle's way of doing things—I was just going to walk in that back door and let 'em both have it in the back. But I didn't. I fired both barrels into the ceiling. It just didn't seem right not to give 'em a chance to go for their guns. . . ."

Gracie smiled at him through misty eyes.

THE DEVIL'S GRAVEYARD

CHAPTER ONE

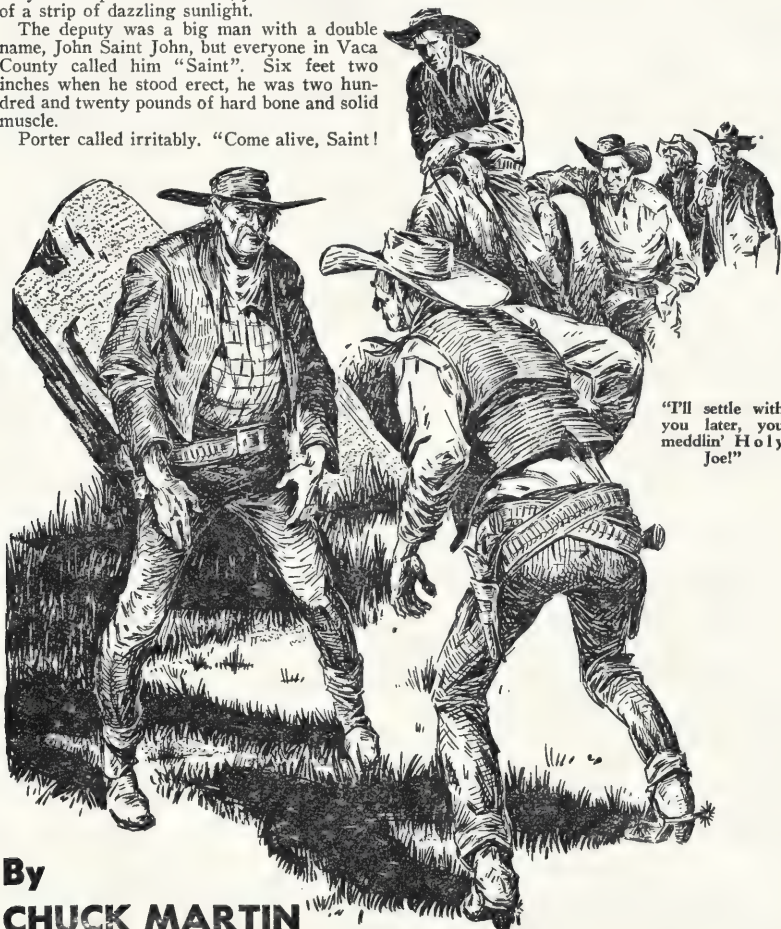
Fighting Talk

SHERIFF CORD PORTER sat behind his desk in the jail office, staring moodily at a blue bottle fly. It was siesta time in Vaca, and Porters' deputy was dozing peacefully on the prisoner's bench, just out of reach of a strip of dazzling sunlight.

The deputy was a big man with a double name, John Saint John, but everyone in Vaca County called him "Saint". Six feet two inches when he stood erect, he was two hundred and twenty pounds of hard bone and solid muscle.

Porter called irritably. "Come alive, Saint!

"It's always open season on wolves, an' the law never outlaws murder. I'm finishin' this thing now. Reach for your gun!"



"I'll settle with you later, you meddlin' Holy Joel!"

By

CHUCK MARTIN

Double trouble is riding into Vaca on fast horses, but coming one at a time!"

John Saint John shed his sleepiness like a great tawny cat. He wore buckskins and a gray Stetson over a heavy shock of tousled blond hair. His eyebrows and longhorn mustaches were bleached by the high desert sun, and his light blue eyes were deceptively peaceful.

"They can't settle their differences in Vaca," Sheriff Porter said sternly. "You watch Sevens Todd, and I'll keep an eye on Trig Chansey."

John Saint John nodded and twitched his belt gun against his hip. The two peace officers stepped out into the brilliant afternoon sunlight with hats pulled low over their eyes. They walked side by side along the high boardwalk to the Casino Saloon.

Cord Porter smiled grimly as he watched the shadows they were casting ahead. He was only five feet nine, weighed a hundred and fifty-five, and tallied his age at thirty years. For six of them he had been sheriff of Vaca County, known as "The Arizona Strip" and a haven for fast-shooting outlaws.

Two men were riding into town from opposite directions. Sevens Todd came from the east where he owned the Four Sevens cattle spread. Trig Chansey rode in from the west where he operated a small horse outfit near the badlands.

Every man in the little cattle town knew that Chansey's horse ranch was only a front for his other activities, most of which were close to the border line of the law. He bought and sold cattle of doubtful ownership, seldom lost at gambling, and had killed three men in "self defense"—after taunting them into making a suicidal try against his lightning-like draw.

The two lawmen pushed through the swinging doors of the Casino, shoulder to shoulder. Saint John stopped at the front end of the bar, but Cord Porter walked to the far end. Both ordered small beers.

The fat little bartender drew two, scraped the foam collars with a bone knife, and crossed his hands in a swift double movement. One glass went north, the other south, but both stopped within the cupped left hands of the law.

Cord Porter was watching the street under the batwing doors, but he gave the bardog his measure of praise.

"Nice work, Shorty. You improve with age."

Shorty Fargo smiled with appreciation, and leaned against the back bar. He began to polish a thin glass for something to do. Shorty was an old-timer in Vaca, and he knew everything about everybody. The law was going to try to stop another killing.

A horse slid to a stop in front of the tie rail. Scuffing boots rattled across the boardwalk, and a wide-shouldered cattleman split the swinging doors and came inside.

Sevens Todd scowled when he saw the law at each end of the bar. He was fifty-odd, wore twin guns in crossed shell-studded belts with the tie-backs fastened low. He ordered a shot of bourbon and told Shorty to leave the bottle.

Another horse stopped outside, splattering gravel against the board-fronted saloon. A tall slender man stepped from the saddle to the boardwalk, and his spurs dragged as he came in stiff-legged, like a dog on the fight.

Trig Chansey's cold gray eyes were set deep in a long bony face. His nose was like the curving beak of a hawk, his mouth a thin gash with deep lines etched on each side. He sneered as he stared at Sevens Todd at the middle of the bar.

The sheriff and his deputy would make good witnesses in court, and Sevens Todd had called him a rustler. Todd had bet a hundred head of steers in a poker game, and Todd had lost the pot. Todd had also been very drunk, and Trig Chansey had gone out to the Sevens outfit with three men and had collected his winnings before Todd had sobered up.

Trig Chansey nodded at Shorty Fargo, ordered whiskey straight with a chaser of the same. He leaned his elbows on the mahogany six feet away from Sevens Todd. Shorty did his stuff, sliding two pony glasses down the bar where they stopped within Chansey's cupped palms.

Trig Chansey closed his slender fingers and made two swift passes at his cruel mouth. The glasses thudded down on the bar, first the right, and then the left, like a rattling echo. Chansey pushed away from the bar and spoke softly.

"Heard you was going to smoke me down, Todd. I didn't hear you say so, but this same gent allowed that you called me a rustler in public."

SEVENS TODD looked up slowly, glanced at the law at each end of the bar, and slowly shook his head.

"Some other time, Chansey," he said quietly, but his deep voice was grim and unafraid.

"No time like the present," Chansey insisted, and his gray slitted eyes were like glare ice. "We'll review the case for your benefit. You got hot-blooded and bet me a hundred head of steers against two thousand dollars. You lost on the showdown, and I collected my bet."

"You rode out to my place and drove off a hundred head of my prime shipping steers," Todd told his side of the deal. "You haven't got a bill of sale, and you won't get one. I had four kings with the ace of hearts for a stopper, and you came out with four aces. I

didn't have a gun with me just at the time."

"Lucky for you," Chansey sneered. "Or right now you'd be filling a three-by-seven out in the Devil's Graveyard!"

"One of us would," Todd corrected grimly. "Now I've changed my mind. I'm signing a complaint against you with the sheriff. We can settle this thing in court!"

"Yellowbelly," Chansey sneered, and made a pass for his holstered gun.

John Saint John coughed softly and clicked back the hammer of his Peacemaker .45, pointed it at Trig Chansey's heart. Chansey slogged his half-drawn six-shooter back in the buscadero holster.

"I'll remember this play, Saint," he warned, his husky voice a thin whisper of sound. "Outside of Vaca County, you don't pack any more authority than I do!"

"You're in Vaca County now," the deputy reminded heavily. "If we meet outside, I wouldn't want to get shot in the back."

"Why, you big ox!" Chansey taunted. "All my notches were shot in the front, and you won't be any different!"

"You're under arrest, Chansey!" Cord Porter interrupted crisply. "There's two charges against you now. One is for rustling, the other for threatening a peace officer with death. Anything you say will be used against you. And you better come peaceful!"

"Just a minute, my star-toting *amigo*," a rasping voice came from the back door. "I represent Trig Chansey, and I demand that my client receive the courtesy guaranteed him under the Constitution!"

Saint John held the drop on Chansey as Cord Porter turned slowly to face a dapper little man who might have been either a gambler or a lawyer.

"I recognized your voice, Lawyer Prim," Porter said with a slow smile. "Trig Chansey goes to jail, and you can arrange for bail with Judge McPherson."

Lawyer Prim wore the only necktie in Vaca. His black broadcloth suit was tailored to fit his slender muscular frame. A pair of .45 Colt six-shooters peeped out from under the long tails of his coat. He wore a small black Stetson pushed to the back of his coal-black head, and his beady eyes were like pin-points of polished ebony.

"We can arrange settlement of the bond now," Prim argued. "It will save embarrassment all the way around, sheriff. It is not necessary to place my client in durance vile."

"Don't tell me how to rod the law," Cord Porter answered coldly. "Trig Chansey goes to jail, and the judge will set the bail. That's the law, and you know it as well as I do. Your client can't intimidate me, and I might add that neither can you!"

"Let it ride that away," Trig Chansey in-

terrupted, and his thin lips skinned back to show yellow broken teeth. "But before I go to the calabozo, I've something to say to this welcher at the bar. I mean you, Sevens Todd."

"I'm listening," Todd grunted, watching Chansey in the backbar mirror. "Keep on talking."

"You called me a rustler," Chansey said, and his voice was brassy with anger. "I'm calling you a yellow dawg. You make big war talk, and hide behind the law."

Sevens Todd turned with a flush of shame and anger on his weathered face.

"I didn't know the law would be here," he denied loudly. "I'll meet you any time or place you name, you tin-horn rustler!"

A slow smile of satisfaction spread over the predatory features of the cold-eyed killer. He ignored the sheriff as he gave the time and place to Sevens Todd.

"Make it sundown in the Devil's Graveyard, you mouthy old son. That's outside the county, and to hell with the law. You'll get an even break . . . and a grave in Hell's Half Acre!"

"I want a witness," Todd said slowly. "You'll have this law-sharp siding your play, and I don't hide behind the law. My second can double to do the honors for the deceased. I'm bringing Gospel Cummings!"

JOHAN SAINT JOHN stared at Trig Chansey and indicated the swinging doors with a gesture of his head. Cord Porter watched Lawyer Prim with a hand close to his gun. Prim had an unpredictable temper, and a fast gun-hand.

Cord Porter also knew the effect it would create in Trig Chansey's mind when the barred jail doors clanked shut behind the gambler. Chansey bluffed his way in Vaca with a high hand. Porter turned to Sevens Todd and spoke evenly.

"You better come down and sign the complaint, Todd. Judge McPherson is a stickler for court procedure."

Sevens Todd poured and drank three fingers of bourbon neat. He turned to stare for a moment at Lawyer Prim, paid for his liquor, and left the Casino with the sheriff. After the papers were signed, Todd mounted his horse and rode toward his cattle spread in the foothills.

Cord Porter took his papers and walked into the court of the justice of the peace. Judge McPherson glanced up over the tops of his spectacles. He was a big raw-boned man in his late forties, slow of speech, and fair in all his judgments.

"I arrested Trig Chansey, your Honor," the sheriff said respectfully. "Lawyer Prim is waiting to post bond, after you have set the bail."

"One thousand dollars cash on the rustling

charge, five hundred on the threat complaint," the judge said sternly, and made a notation on the complaint. "Did Sevens Todd ask for a bond to preserve the peace?"

"He did not, your Honor," Porter answered with a shake of his head. "Had Todd asked for a peace bond, it would not hold good outside the county boundaries."

"Quite so, sheriff," Lawyer Prim remarked importantly, as he stepped to the bench and counted out paper money.

"Not so fast, Counselor," the judge reproved sternly. "Sheriff, bring the prisoner in for arraignment!"

Lawyer Prim scowled at what he considered a further affront to his client. Cord Porter left the court and returned within five minutes. Minus his twin six-shooters, Trig Chansey was seething with anger.

At a whispered word from Prim, the gambler controlled his temper. He pled not guilty to both charges, demanded a jury trial, and turned to Sheriff Cord Porter with an assumption of his old arrogance.

"I'll take my hardware now, law dog," he demanded huskily.

"Step down to the jail and get them, gun dog," the sheriff retorted sternly. "Meanwhile, I'm serving an attachment on that hundred head of Sevens' steers you took from Todd. Orders of the judge!"

Trig's face grew black with rage. He turned on one high heel and almost ran from the court room. Cord Porter followed leisurely, and Lawyer Prim went back to his one-room office over the Casino saloon.

When Porter reached the office, Trig Chansey was demanding his guns from John Saint John. The solid deputy looked the gambler over, told him to have a seat on the prisoner's bench, and to mind his manners.

"I'll get you, Saint," Chansey promised in a husky whisper. "I'll get you if it's the last mortal thing I do!"

"It will be," Cord Porter said from the doorway, and walked to his desk where he opened a drawer. "Here's your hardware, and I hope you never come up for trial."

"Save your wishes for Sevens Todd," Chansey sneered. "He will never appear in court against me, and I'm giving you a special invitation to ride out and see the execution. Like you know, the Devil's Graveyard is not in Vaca County."

"Get gone, you cheap tin-horn killer," Saint John growled angrily "before I forget my star and take you apart with my hands!"

Trig Chansey holstered his guns and whirled to face the big deputy.

"Make a try!" he challenged.

Saint John lunged to his feet before the sheriff could interfere. Trig Chansey's gun was out before Saint John's boots hit the floor

and he triggered two dry shots at the angry deputy.

Saint John slapped out with a huge left hand, sent Chansey reeling through the door, across the boardwalk, and into the dusty street. Then he stood over the groggy gambler while he told him that he had ejected the cartridges from both guns before placing them in the sheriff's desk.

"And don't load them until you get out of town," the deputy warned. "I could have shot you for making a gunplay against the law while a similar charge is pending against you in court. Sorry I lost my temper, sheriff," he apologized to Porter.

Trig Chansey picked up his empty gun, seated it in leather, and bow-legged down the street to his horse. He quit the town with his horse in a high lope.

Porter spoke reproachfully to his deputy. "You ran in a blazer on that killer, Saint. If he ever gets you under his sights, I'll need a new deputy."

Saint John rubbed the handle of his old .45 Peacemaker. He squared his shoulders and spoke in a deep rumbling voice.

"I might shoot second, but I'll shoot," he promised grimly. "If he gets me, he'll go along for company. Any orders?"

Cord Porter rubbed his square chin thoughtfully. He knew that Saint John wanted to see the gun duel between Trig Chansey and Sevens Todd.

"Let's saddle and ride," Porter said decisively. "We can see that Todd gets a fair shake, and maybe Gospel Cummings will talk Sevens out of going through with it."

SILENT riders were drifting out of town with the westerling sun. The sheriff and his deputy rubbed stirrups and held their horses to a dog trot. Saint John nudged Porter when Sevens Todd galloped past them with another man.

"Yonder goes Gospel Cummings with the condemned man," Saint John whispered.

Gospel Cummings wore a frock-tailed coat that had once been black, but was now green with age. Tall and ungainly, he carried a Bible under his left arm and a brace of .44 six-shooters tied down on his long thin legs. His face was covered by a luxuriant black beard, his deep-set brown eyes moody with some inner sorrow.

"When it comes to busting sin, Gospel takes the marbles," Saint John commented sincerely. "Many's the time I've seen him crying in his beard because he can't leave John Barleycorn alone. Fast with his cutters too, but he never shoots to kill. Him and Boot Hill Crandall make a pair to draw to. Boot Hill furnishes the coffin, but he makes the winner dig the grave. Then Boot Hill chisels the name of the

deceased on one of them natural head stones in Hell's Half Acre."

Cord Porter took the lead and rode through the rocky pass. He had a feeling which urged him to take off his hat, and then he saw Sevens Todd talking with Gospel Cummings near a row of volcanic rocks which looked like headstones for graves. Porter walked his horse through the sand and stopped a dozen paces from the two men.

"Are you prepared for death, my brother?" Cummings inquired in a deep solemn voice. "Shall I offer up a plea for your everlasting soul?"

"I'll die like I've lived, if needs be," Sevens Todd answered with a shrug. "Save the prayer for Trig Chansey."

Gospel Cummings sighed and stared at the toes of his rusty boots. Then he reached into the tails of his frock coat, produced a quart bottle, and drew the cork with his teeth.

"You will condone my weakness," he said to Todd, and marked the bottle with his thumb. He drank down to the mark and sighed again as he replaced the cork and restored the bottle to its hiding place.

"This spot of evil is rightly named," Gospel Cummings said with a trace of anger in his mournful voice. "The Devil rules here, and yonder come his angels."

Cord Porter glanced up and frowned. The buzzards were winging in from the lava badlands, floating on motionless pinions with effortless ease. Several of the big carrion birds glided to the far end of the pocket of desert waste, alighting on tall shafts of rock chiseled with the names of dead men.

Along the east canyon wall, a dozen riders from Vaca town were sitting their horses, talking quietly in lowered tones. Money was being passed as bets were made, and the odds were long against Sevens Todd.

Gospel Cummings wiped his bearded lips with the back of his hand, opened his Bible, and slowly shook his head.

"The Book tells of many battles and encounters," he said softly. "Of David and Goliath, Cain and Abel, and of the fall of Babel. It states clearly: *'Thou shalt not kill,'* and in another place it says: *'I come not to bring you peace, but a sword!'*"

Cord Porter listened and backed his horse away. He turned toward the entrance when thudding hoofs echoed from the narrow pass. Two men were riding through at a gallop. They swerved toward the left when they saw Sevens Todd standing with Gospel Cummings.

Trig Chansey dismounted. The sun was a coppery ball hovering just above the horizon in the west. The insects had become silent, and for a moment all life seemed to hang in a state of suspended animation.

"It's sundown," Chansey announced, and

his voice was like twanging brass. "You and that sky pilot still have a minute to say your prayers, and I've already paid Boot Hill Crandall for your coffin."

"Likewise," Sevens Todd said in a low steady voice. "One of us won't ever leave the Devil's Graveyard!"

CHAPTER TWO

Shield and Buckler

LAWYER PRIM made a mark with his left boot and stepped off ten paces where he made another mark. He called to Trig Chansey to face the east, telling Todd to take the other mark. This position put the sun in Todd's eyes. Gospel Cummings voiced his objection.

"We will wait until sundown, gentlemen," he announced firmly. "My principal would be blinded like the Pharisees who had eyes, yet they could not see!"

"Save your oratory for those who need it," Lawyer Prim barked. "I will examine your man's six-shooter, while you exercise the same privilege on my client's lethal weapon."

"You are indeed in a strange business, my legal friend," Gospel Cummings remarked. "We are satisfied with your client's implement of death, and that goes both ways. But if you care to press the point . . ." and Gospel Cummings elbowed his coat-tail aside and came out with a burnished six-shooter in his right hand.

"Cut the wind-jammin' and let's get down to cases," Trig Chansey interrupted harshly. "The chips are down, and I'm calling to see what Todd catches . . . *on the draw!*"

Sevens Todd nodded, grim-faced and unafraid.

"I'll count to three," Lawyer Prim appointed himself as time keeper, and Gospel Cummings immediately selected himself as referee to nullify any signal which might have been agreed upon in advance.

"You'll take off your dinky Stetson," he told the lawyer. "When you open your clutching fingers, that's the go-ahead!"

Cord Porter watched the two gunmen take their positions. He had long since dismissed the law issue from his mind. He was wondering if Sevens Todd had slowed up because of his age, or if Trig Chansey had grown overconfident because of previous victories.

Lawyer Prim took a stand between the two men and well off to one side. Trig Chansey watched Sevens Todd who faced him in a crouch with his right hand hovering over his six-shooter.

"One!"

(Continued on page 104)

"You're the one that'll hang for this murder!" the raider chief boasted—but he'd forgotten to remember that it's not always a rope that hangs a man!

Four of Candler's raiders blocked the mouth of the wash. . . .



HANGNOOSE BAIT

By

DAVID CREWE

FRINGE rippled along the seams of Cole Atsatt's tunic as he rose and reached down to unbuckle the gunbelt about his narrow waist. His eyes moved to the bales of beaver in the shadows at the edge of the firelit circle, and a smile of complete satisfaction bent his lips.

Tomorrow was another day but it would see him many miles closer to Taos. If the gentry back in St. Louis were as keen as they'd been in the past for tall beaver-skin hats, the price he'd get for this year's plew would see him and Mary set in the little trading post they planned to open in Taos. At the thought

he felt his moment's regret, for after that he would only be hearing the tall tales that other trappers, coming from the Rockies and the Yellowstone, might have to tell instead of living them. But a man had to quit the wild life sometime and settle down to respectable living.

He was just stooping to scoop dirt over the remaining embers of his fire before turning in when the racking sound of hooves came drifting down to him from the upper Santa Fe Trace, disappearing into the darkness beyond his camp.

Cole straightened like a sprung bow as his ears caught the ring of steel against the rocky roadbed. Eutaw ponies were never shod and he relaxed immediately. White men were descending the Trace, quite a number of them, judging from the echoes that were filling the night. Probably a group of trappers heading out from Taos toward Fort Bent which he had recently left himself.

A goodly number of emigrants bound for Taos and Santa Fe had been held up at the fort, he recalled, waiting for the roads to dry so that they could come on without fear of bogging their wagons along the Trace. And there had been some talk, he remembered, about a band of men who self-styled themselves, the Raton Raiders. Stories had filtered back to Fort Bent of gutted wagons and dead men, but Cole had taken little stock in the talk.

Whites had enough trouble on their hands protecting themselves from the Eutaws who jealously guarded Raton Pass, but yet the tales he had heard were enough to make him start toward the Colts he had just deposited beside his blankets.

Cole Atsatt took one long step and then a voice from the edge of the firelit circle stopped him in his tracks.

"Don't reach for that gun of yours, mister. We always come on foot to look over a camp, afore the rest of the bunch ride in!"

Cole heard the oily click of a Colt coming to full cock, and his shining gray eyes looked reluctantly at the weapons he had chuckled. They were still a long three paces from him, and he cursed himself for having laid them aside. A long plunge might carry him to them, he figured with sudden coolness, but before he could act on the impulse, riders were sweeping in from all sides.

They came into his camp on rearing, plunging mounts, and every one of them was masked from the nose to chin. The acrid odor of horse sweat fought with the tangy fragrance of pines. Cole took it all in as he straightened and faced the interlopers.

Drawn Colts or rifles were in the hands of most of the dozen odd riders. A single move now toward his own weapons would court instant death, Cole realized, and he kept his long

arms moveless at his side. These were the Raton Raiders, he had heard about, and he was sorry now for not having listened to emigrant advice that he stay and accompany them to Taos.

"And who might you hombres be?" he asked coolly of a black-masked rider who had drawn a little ahead of the rest. The leader of the raiders was broad-shouldered, stocky. He filled his saddle like a thick wedge driven into an oak. Above the line of his mask, piercing black eyes peered down at the tall trapper standing in the midst of them.

"You guess, Atsatt," he drawled. The man knew his name. That meant he was likely from Taos.

Cole kept his face impassive. "I've never been much of a hand at guessin' games," he returned.

The raider laughed shortly. "You ain't long out of Fort Bent, Atsatt. So mebbe you don't know that a bunch of dude emigrants got impatient and pulled out practically on your heels. They ain't more'n a dozen miles behind you right now. Five wagons. Just our size, particularly when some of 'em are carrying plenty gold."

A thought as to why this bunch had jumped his camp flashed across Cole's mind, but he pretended ignorance, desperately trying to keep the masked man talking. If he could keep stalling, a chance might come to him to make a spring for his weapons.

"What have those wagons got to do with me?" he asked.

The leader of the band chuckled mirthlessly behind his mask. "You've been gone a spell from Taos," he drawled, "so you don't know that the Bent brothers have been raising quite some particular hell about us burnin' a few wagons and making off with whatever was worth takin', principally gold. They've even got the troops Kearney left to keep order here stirred up ag'in us. If the citizens and them troopers figgered they had one of us tuh make an example of, why mebbe the fire would simmer down a mite. That bein' the case, we un's come to the conclusion that what Taos needed was a good hangin'!"

"Go on," Cole said tersely.

For a moment, however, the stocky Trace outlaw remained silent while his black eyes studied the tall man before him. Wide-shouldered and slim-hipped in his belted tunic, Cole stood as straight as a Cheyenne lance, facing the death these men contemplated for him.

"Yeah," the Trace raider murmured, "you're the one they're goin' to hang, Atsatt!"

COLE moved then with deceptive swiftness toward his weapons, and for the chance to fight in the darkness of the pines so close and yet so very very far from

him. The voice of the Raton raider blared out:

"Ride him down, you fools. Make no mistake. Don't kill him!"

His belt was just in front of him now, the scarred handle of his Colt protruding above holster leather. He reached down with one long arm; then he heard horse's hooves scramble over pine needles, and saw the shadow of the animal loom above him. A plunging knee smashed against his ear, and pain shot agonizingly through his side as the animal's other forefoot struck him in the ribs. His last fading memory was of words that imprinted themselves like fiery embers on his brain.

"Good work, Turk. He'll be out for quite some spell after that rap on the noggin. Tie him up and bring him along. Most emigrants know the Eutaws never strike at night, so their guards usually sleep at their posts. Makes it nice for us. Particularly when there's gold to be had for the taking—"

When consciousness fully returned to Cole he discovered that he was being supported in the saddle of a galloping mount by some man up behind him.

His own hands, he found, were thonged tightly behind his back.

But they hadn't gagged him. He still had his voice, and the chance came within the space of minutes to use it. Through eyes that were still aswim with pain he saw the shape of heavy-built Conestoga and Pittsburgh wagons circled tongue to tail-gate on an empty boulder-stream flat just ahead. Osna-burg tilts made a pale shine of white against the blackness of the night. And inside the circle, Cole saw the winking eyes of a bright fire, lit by the guards to warm themselves between rounds of the wagons.

He had a hunch that the wagons were not very well guarded by dude emigrants who enjoyed the warmth of their fire at the expense of the company's safety. Cole grimly hoped the guards had their rifles and short-guns close to them, even if they were lazing in the fire's heat.

The line of Raton Raiders curved out ahead of him, their stocky chief leading them. And above the thunder of the hooves Cole heard the man's bellowing voice speak a message to the wagon train.

"Trappers bound for Fort Bent," he shouted. "We're comin' in to warm our bones at yore fire."

Cole marshaled all the breath in his chest, but some involuntary tensing of his muscles must have warned the man supporting him in the saddle, for he heard the other curse.

Cole let one wild yell fly from his lips. "Raton Raiders," he sent the cry winging forward. "Man your posts!"

"You'll pay for that, bucko!" a voice

mouthed at his back. Cole saw the blue glint of the gun as it rose, and he tried to twist his head aside, but the effort was wasted.

Cole woke a second time to crashing pain. Rude hands were on his shoulders, shaking him, and stabbing torch light made him blink as he pried his eyes open.

"He's comin' around," a voice growled. "From the looks of his head we creased the cuss, and he got his clothes mussed and skinned up some when he took that header off'n his horse. Blast me, I'd give a purty penny to know the name of the hombre who yelled out at us from their bunch. He shore saved our bacon. If them cusses had got inside our circle there'd a been hell an' damnation to pay. Too bad we didn't git more of 'em, but I guess they ain't got much taste for lead when all the odds ain't on their side. Wake up now, damn yuh, and name yore pards!"

Cole opened his eyes, and looked up into the face of the talkative wagon camp man. Full-bearded and blustery, wearing clothes a cut better than the average emigrant's, he looked like he might be the captain of this dude train.

"I can't name your raiders," he said with a tongue that felt like a piece of dry leather in his mouth, "because I'm the man who warned you."

"That's what yuh say!" the blustery man reached down and ruthlessly yanked something from about the trapper's neck. Cole stared at the train man. The fellow was dangling something in front of his face now, leering down at him.

"So you're the one," he said with heavy sarcasm, "who called out to us, eh? Wa'al take a look at this black mask we seen 'em wearin', and tell us how come you had it around yore neck?"

The raiders had done a good job of making him hang-noose bait, Cole thought bitterly, and this loud-mouthed cuss wasn't helping matters any.

"You'll find my camp at the foot of Raton," he said thickly. "They hit it and captured me the same way they were planning to take you. My winter's catch will be gone to them, but you'll find sign of my camp all right. They left me for yuh to take into Taos, and hangin'."

The burly train-man chuckled. "Which is just what I'll do. Me, Dunc Edwards, I'm captain of this outfit, mister, and by the time I git done with you hangin' will seem like a treat!"

Cole drew a ragged breath, and anger was driving some of the pain from his head and long body. The least a man might expect was a chance to prove his innocence.

"You'll find plenty of folks in Taos," he

snapped, "who know Cole Atsatt and my business."

"A trapper, yeah," Dunc Edwards grinned. "Most likely yuh can prove that too without even a beaver-tail to your name. Now, me, I'd say you'd been doin' your share of raiding Taos-bound caravans along with a lot of other hombres who'd probably claim they'd been trapping, too."

"Cole!" the voice was shrill and young, and it cut through the train captain's heavy talk like a knife through a wet shin.

Struggling to a sitting position, the Taos trapper was in time to meet the rush of a stripping of twelve who darted between the group of wagoners and their women. Dropping to his knees, the boy made a grab for one of Atsatt's hands.

Cole recognized the thin-faced, freckled youth as one of the youngsters who had met him with eager eyes when he had ridden through the gates of Fort Bent with his pack-train of loaded mules at his back. The boy's blue eyes had registered enthusiasm and something akin to hero worship when Cole had ceremoniously doffed his fur cap and given the youngster a friendly grin. After that, young Jim Harris had been his constant shadow while he had rested his stock at the Fort. Jim's father was a man of God, Cole had learned, chaplain of the train they'd traveled with from Council Grove.

"Cole, you ain't no Raton raider!" he cried. "Dang it, I saw you ride through the gates of Fort Bent and yuh had a string of four pack hosses on lead behind your saddler. Every dang'd one of 'em was loaded with pelts. I seen 'em with my own eyes. Yuh didn't get them furs raiding wagons haiding for Taos!"

"I've always figgered kids were to be seen and not heard," Dunc Edwards said coldly. "Mebbe you don't know it, Harris," and he was speaking for the benefit of the many ears listening, "that the Bents told me more'n one trapper had lost a season's catch to those vultures waiting in the mountains to swoop down on any caravan bound for Taos. Bringin' packs to Fort Bent could have been a blind, to gain information on the movement of the next caravan. I recollect that yore dad even invited this Atsatt to lay over and ride with us to Taos, but he pulled out all alone, and rode this way to warn his pards of our comin'."

It was evidence to damn a man. Cole saw faces that had been noncommittal turn suddenly vengeful. Dunc Edwards with his twisted logic had spoiled any chance he might have had of appealing to the group as a whole.

"You'll git your chance to tell it to the soldiers," Edwards drawled, and he seemed to be enjoying the plight of the groggy trapper. "Yeah, you'll get your chance, Atsatt!"

"D AM cuss will think he skeered the tar out of me."

Cole didn't realize that he had muttered the words aloud, until young Jim Harris' voice made an immediate hot reply. "Ain't nobody in their right minds goin' to think that at all, Cole!"

"Now, son," another deeper voice chimed in, "you must let Mr. Atsatt rest."

Without opening his burning eyes, Cole recognized the tone of Chaplain Ben Harris, young Jim's father, and from the feel of softness and warmth beneath him he guessed that they had taken him into their own wagon and put him on a featherbed.

"Rest, nothing!" the boy's reply roused Cole completely. "He's got to get out of here and do it fast. Mornin' ain't far away, and yuh know as well as me, dad, what that Dunc Edwards will do to Cole come tomorrow. He'll put a dog chain around his neck, and make him walk behind a wagon, eating dust and shame until he's ready to die. No, sir, that Dunc ain't going to treat any friend of mine that way."

"Now you cut a hole in the off-side sheeting," he went on, "and slip Cole through it while Dunc Edwards and his two-bit dude guards watch the t'other side. I'll moscey out while you're slicin' canvas, dad, and tell the fellers Edwards set to watch our wagon, that Cole is still out colder. I'll tell 'em I'm goin' down to Ol' Miz Callahan's wagon to git some of her home remedies to feed him. Nobody will ever figger she's got a saddle in her wagon that I want a heap sight more than herb tea."

"And a pet horse in the cavvy," Cole heard Chaplain Ben sigh, "that will come to you at sight. Son, may the Good Lord forgive me for having raised such a brash youngster, but if I were a few years younger I would take the chore off your hands!"

Cole opened his eyes then and a grin that he couldn't repress touched his wide lips. "Parson," he drawled to the sober-faced man hunched beside him in the candle-lit interior of the wagon, "if you ever want that son taken off your hands let me know—if I'm around to know anything!"

The chaplain's face was kind. "You will be around," he said with certainty. He went to rummaging through a trunk against one bulging side of the commodious Conestoga. He lifted a Navy Colt, belt and shot-pouch from its interior as young Jim slipped down from the tail-gate.

"Even a man of God," Ben Harris murmured, "must at times use the weapons of the Devil. These are yours, and may every bullet in the revolver's chamber fly true to wreak Jehovah's wrath on the evil-doers who seek to gain fortune at the expense of emigrants who

ask nothing more than homes and security in the new territory that Colonel Kearney has added to the United States."

It was quite a speech. Cole met it with mixed emotions as he struggled to his knees. "You ask a heap," he said thickly, "but I'll do my damndest to make your wish pan out, for more reasons than one. Mebbe I'm a mite selfish, but I've had a good name in Taos, and me and my wife have been aimin' to open a little place there for you folks to do your trading. I can't do that now without a clean name. So I'm more than ever obliged to you and Jim for giving me the chance to clear it."

The horse Harris had ridden across the far plains from Council Grove to Bent's Fort was a good animal, Cole found, as the miles separating him from Raton Pass slid beneath the animal's feet. After slipping through the slitted sheeting, he had found Jim and his pet, Brownie, sheltered in the boulder field to the west of the circled wagons.

"Got him out here without a bit of trouble," the boy had said scornfully. "It's a good thing for us that the Eutaws are superstitious about hitting a wagon train in the dark. If they warn't we'd a lost our scalps afore this. Git goin' now, Cole," he had cheered the trapper on his way, "and I'm counting on hearing some tall ones from yuh when we hit Taos!"

Cole remembered the youth's final words with grim amusement. He'd have some tall tales to tell all right, if he managed to locate the Raton Raiders' camp from the one meager lead he had.

It was nothing more than a scent his nose had picked up when the raiders had ridden into his Raton camp—the pungent smell of horse sweat mingling with the sharp fragrance of the pines. To him it had only one meaning. The raiders had ridden their mounts hard down the treacherous Raton Pass road, and they must have come quite a number of miles to steam horses into such a sweat.

"My guess would be the Hungry Buttes," Cole muttered the words aloud. There were caves in the buttes, some of them walled by ancient cliff-dwellers who had once lived there. The caves had gained their name when a group of early explorers, caught by a winter blizzard, had sought refuge there. One man or a dozen could hide out in the Hungry Buttes, and a posse would have trouble smoking them out.

The thought turned him to his camp, and in the gray light of early dawn, Cole blinked. No sign was left to mark the spot where he had started to spend the night! On leaving young Jim, he had told the boy to be sure and get his father to insist on pausing here at the base of Raton to prove his assertion that he had camped here when the raiders struck. But their stocky leader had even taken that

possibility into consideration. On their return to Raton, the raiders had paused long enough to clean the last evidence of occupation from the area.

Cole studied the site, and then shook his head which Chaplain Ben Harris had banded. "These hombres sure want to see me hang!" he grunted.

Once more he was riding, but this time hard and fast with a definite purpose. As he traveled, Cole kept testing the hide of his mount for sign of sweat. Pain moved through him at each step the brown horse took, but he clamped his teeth against it. Now was no time to worry about his hurts.

The day grew bright and the brown under him crested rugged Raton. Cole gentled the animal, and put his hands to its flanks. No man, he guessed, had ever used a queerer guide to a given destination than the feel of sweat on a horse's heavy coat. His eyes coasted forward over the wild tangle of mountains and valleys that lay between him and Taos—and home.

But thoughts of home was something he had to steel himself against. Time enough to think of Mary and the welcome he had planned for her after visiting the Hungry Buttes.

His eyes involuntarily sought them out, and he estimated their distance at probably five miles from where he had halted. Gaunt against the morning sky, the towering, tawny rampart loomed to the right of the Trace. Brushy gulches separated the buttes from the emigrant road and washes one man or fifty could ride without being detected.

Still moving deliberately fast, Cole kept his hand on the now steaming flanks of his mount. The test was a rude one, he realized, subject to many errors, and though his eyes still felt blurry, Cole kept studying the right side of the rutted trace for any signs where the horsemen might have turned off into one of the innumerable washes that climbed upward from the Trace toward the Hungry Buttes.

Slowing the brown now to better scan the dusty trace, Cole caught the pungent odor of sweat steaming his mount's flanks. He was in the right neighborhood if scent meant anything.

BRUSH, and scrub pine darkened the mouth of a rocky wash directly ahead, and the limpness of a broken shrub at its entrance attracted his attention. Something heavy brushing against it had broken the tender spring branches, and Cole turned immediately to investigate.

No sign showed on the road, but a sweeping hide across the ruts and dust could have wiped out tracks. Those raiders, Cole thought grimly, were mighty careful men.

He dipped through the fringe of brush mak-

ing the V mouth of the narrow canyon, and the real thoroughness of the Raton raiders was instantly apparent to him. Hungary Buttes might be their hideout but right here beside the trace was where they had waited for any chance trailers who might have followed them from the Edwards train.

To Cole it seemed that both slopes were suddenly a-crawl with riders. "Trouble Trace!" the trapper muttered, and his right hand reached for the Colt Chaplain Ben Harris had loaned him while his left sawed reins across the neck of the brown. The animal needed no urging to turn and flee as a bullet burned across its withers. Cole heard the lethal *whaang* of lead as another shot ricocheted from the horn of his saddle.

All of the raiders racing down on him were wearing the black clothes they'd had on the night before, save for their leader who had changed into a white buckskin outfit. Cole saw the man's hand reach spasmodically for his throat, but the handkerchief was not there to draw up and hide his face. As the man passed through a splash of light seeping through the pines, Cole saw him as though a spotlight were shining on his face.

Instant recognition that was like a hot current shot through the trapper. "Candler!" the word sprang to his lips. And the questions that had been bothering him were answered in that moment of recognition, for Bem Candler was owner of the Taos Outfitting Post.

His change of garb probably indicated that he had been about to return to Taos in the guise of a businessman. Once there he could again keep his eyes and ears open to hear all the news about oncoming trains that trappers and Fort Bent visitors could bring him. And there was more than that to it. Cole Atsatt also realized now why Bem Candler had singled him out for hangnoose bait. The trader hadn't wanted anybody to start a rival post in Taos that would cut into his legitimate business.

"Shoot him down!" Candler was screaming the order to his men. "We can't take the cuss into Taos now. He's seen too much!"

Cole had the brown around in a desperate attempt to flee back the way he had come, but his retreat was cut off. Four of Candler's raiders had raced down from the pines to block the mouth of the wash.

Cole flung a shot at them that missed. Four loads were left in his Colt, and there'd be no time to recharge his weapon. Each of those bullets had to make a direct hit if he was to have even a fighting chance of remaining free long enough to reach Taos and the lieutenant in charge of the platoon of blue jackets Kearney had stationed there.

He spent a second shot and saw the black

mask across the face of one of the raiders ahead of him jerk to the impact of striking lead. The man went back across the rump of his mount as though a battering ram had hit him. His horse swung crazily into the mount next to him, and in the half of a second two kicking animals were down.

Cole felt the iron-hot impact of lead smash into his back. The force of the slug drove his face into the flying mane of his brown mount, but he managed to force his head up again.

Riders with blazing guns in their hands were sweeping in behind the three raiders who still blocked his exit from the canyon, and leading them was a black-garbed parson and a stripling boy!

Behind him, Cole heard the howling voice of Bem Candler. "Scatter," he was commanding his men. "Split up, and don't any of yuh git captured or kilt. One dead man for 'em to identify might hang us all!"

But there was one man already on the ground that Cole had dropped, and quickly there were three others, the remainder of the four who had tried to keep him from gaining the Trace. Emigrant lead spilled them from their saddles, and Chaplain Ben Harris' up-flung arm halted his riders before they could start in pursuit of Candler and his raiders.

The parson's face was long and bleak as Cole reached them. "Leave be, men," his deep voice thundered out the order. "Enough blood has been spilled for one morning. Colonel Kearney's soldiers will take up the chore."

"Cole—" young Jim's intense face was close to the trapper's as he swung his mount alongside the brown—"yuh've been shot. There's blood all down your back."

Cole grinned against pain and weakness. "It's a mighty light price to pay, son, to clear the Raton of raiders. But how come yo're here?"

It was the boy's turn to grin and glance pridefully at his father. "'Twas dad's idea," he declared. "We helped you git away, and then he raised the alarm to have yuh followed, figgerin' that mebbe you'd need help if you hit the trail of that Raton bunch of killers!"

Dunc Edwards came pushing forward to join them, and Cole saw a smile on the man's bearded face as he extended his hand to the trapper.

"I may do a lot of talkin', Atsatt," he boomed, "but I've never been afraid to admit it when I've made a mistake about a man. Let me shake your hand, sir, and congratulate you on your tenacity in trailing this bunch."

Cole smiled a little grimly, and then he deliberately wiped his palm across the neck of his steaming mount before extending it to the train captain. "You'll feel some hoss sweat," he drawled, "and mebbe smell it. Thank that for bringin' us here to the right spot."



The Lost Word

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 97)

The smooth unctuous voice of Lawyer Prim counted off the first numeral. Gospel Cummings flipped his coat tail with surprising speed and threw down to cover the recalcitrant time-keeper.

"Take off your hat, law sharp!" Cummings barked, and the quality of his voice left no doubt that he intended to be obeyed. "Hold your J.B. at arm's length from your shoulder. and let it flutter to the ground. This is going to be an honest deal, and you and your pard can't deal from the bottom of a marked deck. Not if you have any desire to ride out and practice your profession!"

"I'll settle with you later, you meddling Holy Joe," Prim promised from the side of his mouth.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" Gospel Cummings asked, to ease the strain of taut muscles.

Both gun-fighters nodded at the same time. Lawyer Prim glanced over his shoulder to hide the scowl of impatience which twisted his predatory features. It was Trig Chansey who cracked first because his practiced routine have been upset.

"Get on with it!" he snarled. "If that sky pilot chips in once more, you and him can make it a double shoot-out!"

Chansey had his right hand on his gun as he spoke. Then the desert stillness was terminated as a six-shooter roared lustily from a clump of boulders behind the gambler. A second gun echoed the first just as Sevens Todd staggered and swung to the left.

As though acting on a signal, Trig Chansey started to make his fight. His half-drawn gun hung in leather when Sheriff Cord Porter shouted from behind his cocked six-shooter.

"Let it ride, Chansey!"

Trig Chansey skinned back his thin lips as he stared into the gaping bore of Porter's law-gun. Gospel Cummings had the drop on Lawyer Prim, and the lawyer was like a statue, crouching toward Cummings with both hands on his holstered guns.

"Hold it so until Saint gets back," Porter commanded sternly. "Here he comes now with Clem Carson. We figured Chansey would have an ace-in-the-hole. Carson works for Trig Chansey on his T Bar C horse outfit!"

Big John Saint John rode across the sand, gun in hand, a hoop-legged cowboy under his sights. Clem Carson was a bronc-stomper from dinky hat to runover high heels. His thin face was pinched with pain, and he cradled his right hand against his breast with his left.

"I saw you go for your cutter," he said to Trig Chansey, and then he went to his knees.

"I ought to kill you, Chansey!"

THE DEVIL'S GRAVEYARD

Cord Porter spat out the words as though they burned his lips. Clem Carson had exposed the trap and the signal. Saint John filled in the details.

"Carson was holed up behind that nest of rocks like you said, sheriff," the deputy explained. "I had to circle to keep him from seeing my shadow, and there he was with a cocked .45 in his grub hook. He touched off his powder when Chansey gripped his gun-handles, but I was right on top of him with a shot of my own. Is Sevens hurt bad?"

SEVENS TODD sat up and shook his graying head. He began to fumble with the buttons of his shirt as the riders from Vaca rode in to make a circle.

Todd reached inside and brought out a book. A jagged hole pierced the pages, and a piece of battered lead fell to the ground from the open pages where a thin piece of steel had marked some penciled passages.

Gospel Cummings took the small Bible from Todd's hand. His brown eyes were soft with understanding as he pointed to a verse he had marked with a tally pencil.

"The Lord is my shield and my buckler!"

Gospel Cummings explained in a low voice that the bit of polished steel was a mirror used by Army men in the field. He told how he had given the Book to Sevens Todd who had slipped it inside his shirt in a secret pocket over his heart.

Cord Porter watched and listened with a grim expression. The shock of battering lead against his heart had stunned Sevens Todd for a moment, but the intent to commit murder remained the same. Then the sheriff remembered that he had no jurisdiction in the Devil's Graveyard.

John Saint John had no such scruples. He jumped lightly from his horse, facing Trig Chansey in a crouch.

"You said you'd get me outside town, and now's your chance," the big deputy growled savagely. "Make your pass; I've got you faded!"

Trig Chansey smiled coldly and went into the gun-fighter's crouch. Lawyer Prim removed his black Stetson and held it at arm's length.

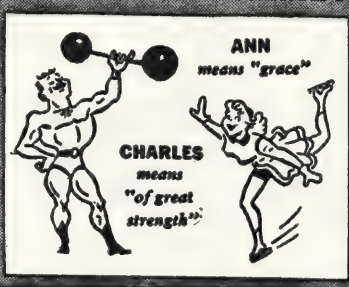
He said: "I'll give the high sign!"

Cord Porter barked: "Hold it, Saint! Don't move a muscle, Chansey!"

Saint John scowled and slowly relaxed. Trig Chansey was holding his right hand straight out from his shoulder, waiting to send that hand swooping down like a striking hawk.

"Lower that arm and shake gently," Porter ordered sternly, but his voice was heavy with authority.

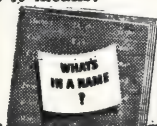
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

"I object!" Lawyer Prim shouted. "This is irrelevant, and aside from the issue under discussion!"

"Objection overruled," Sheriff Porter answered with a shrug, as he pronged back the hammer of his six-shooter. "Shake that arm, gambling man!"

Trig Chansey glared like a trapped coyote, and then he shook his right arm. A small .41 derringer dropped from his sleeve. Saint John growled like a wounded grizzly.

Sevens Todd walked in front of the big deputy. He was like a man with a duty to perform, and his voice was low and quiet when he spoke.

"Don't cut into my play, Saint. I've some unfinished business with that rustling gambler, and it won't wait any longer!"

Saint John bit his lip and then he swept the big gray Stetson from his tousled head, shouldered Lawyer Prim aside, and held the hat at arm's length.

Sevens Todd took his position with a faint smile curling the corners of his mouth. Trig Chansey looked sick, but he had called for a showdown.

John Saint John coughed and slowly opened his big fingers. The hat started downward, but the sweeping blur of Todd's dipping hand made the falling hat seem slow by comparison.

Trig Chansey stabbed for his gun at the same time, outspeeding Sevens Todd in the race with death. Chansey's hand missed the holster in his haste.

Sevens Todd cleared leather with his caloused thumb earing back the hammer on his six-shooter. He took deliberate aim at Chansey's heart, and the gambler closed his eyes as the color drained from his face.

Sevens Todd pointed his gun straight up and triggered a shot. Trig Chansey moaned softly and fell face-forward.

Gospel Cummings dipped into the tails of his long coat and brought out his quart bottle. He drank deeply with both eyes closed. Then he walked over to Sevens Todd and gravely offered his right hand.

"Thou shalt not kill," he quoted soberly. "That white-livered coward fainted from fright."

"Have a drink, and let's get on back to the Sevens outfit for supper."

TRIG CHANSEY sighed and stirred restlessly. He pushed up to a sitting position, glanced furtively about the rock-studded canyon, and shuddered when he saw John Saint John watching him with eyes that recognized the terror in Chansey's bony features.

"Sevens Todd and Gospel are gone," Cord Porter said carelessly. "Your fingers stuttered

THE DEVIL'S GRAVEYARD

on the draw, and you missed your hog-leg completely. Todd shot straight over head, and you fainted like a gal with a guilty conscience."

"I didn't faint," Lawyer Prim broke in in savagely. "You and your deputy drew chips in a game where you hadn't made an ante, and this game isn't finished by a long shot!"

Cord Porter turned his head and looked the venomous lawyer squarely in the eyes.

"Speaking of long shots, that was one Clem Carson tried to make," Porter said thoughtfully. "I'm taking him back to Vaca for medical care. You, Chansey. Stay out of town until the day of your trial!"

"Carson goes back to the T Bar C with us," Lawyer Prim barked arrogantly.

John Saint John straightened up from the first aid work he had been doing on Clem Carson's shattered right hand. The deputy scowled at Prim and dropped a hand to his gun, but Cord Porter again postponed hostilities.

"This is a free country," the sheriff said slowly. "We will let Carson decide the argument."

Clem Carson moaned and refused to look at either Prim or Chansey. He glanced up into Porter's face, liked what he read there, and said he wanted to get to a doctor in town before he bled out.

John Saint John mounted his horse, rode behind the nest of boulders and returned leading Carson's T Bar C horse. The deputy helped Carson to the saddle.

"It's getting dark, sheriff," Saint John suggested. "Let's be rattling our hocks back to Vaca."

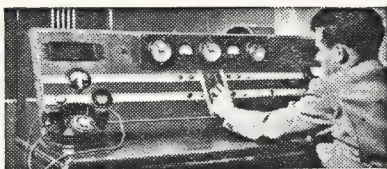
Cord Porter nodded and stepped across his saddle. Saint John started for the entrance to the Devil's Graveyard with Carson. Porter rode slowly, turned in the saddle to watch Prim and Chansey. When they were out of the desert boot bill, Porter rode alongside Carson.

"You're not under arrest, Clem," Porter told the wounded man. "You didn't want to go with Chansey because you knew he would kill you. Do you want to talk any?"

"On Chansey's ranch or in Vaca town, what's the difference? Carson asked shakily. "I was planted to kill Sevens Todd, but Gospel Cummings crossed up our signals."

Cord Porter frowned as he turned over the information Carson had unwittingly given him. Carson had implied that Lawyer Prim would kill him if he stayed in Vaca.

"The law will give you protection in Vaca," Porter promised the wounded bronc rider. "Where does Lawyer Prim fit in the picture with Trig Chansey?"



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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

"Partners!"

Clem Carson whispered the word without hesitation. Then he tightened his jaw and rode with his chin on his chest. He refused to answer any more questions, and he was all but unconscious when the peace officers reined to a stop in front of Doc Whitney's house.

Cord Porter told Saint John to stand guard outside the house. Clem Carson was mumbling incoherently when Porter lifted him from the saddle. He carried Carson into the doctor's study, laid the wounded man on a white table, and helped the doctor cut away Carson's shirt.

"Three fingers shot away," the doctor murmured. "I expected either Todd or Chansey, or perhaps both. I'll have to give him an anesthetic, and if you can stand the smell of ether, you might lend me a hand. He will talk when he comes out from under."

"I can stand it," Porter assured the doctor, and then he indicated a window which looked out into a neat garden. "Better pull the blinds."

The doctor's wife came in with a tray of instruments, drew the window shades to the bottom, and took her place beside the table to help her husband.

"Scalpel," the doctor barked professionally. "Gauze; sutures, clamps!"

Cord Porter drew away and faced the garden window. He loosed his gun of hang from force of habit.

DARKNESS settled down as the doctor and his wife did their work with skilled practiced hands. Clem Carson began to moan, and then he began to babble.

"They'll kill me," Carson whimpered. "I got to get to the Devil's Graveyard first. Got to get the money buried under that headstone. Sigafoose Barnard!"

Cord Porter leaned forward, his nostrils flaring like those of a hound on a hot scent. Sigafoose Barnard had been one of Trig Chansey's victims, and twenty thousand dollars had disappeared from the cattleman's pockets the night he had been killed in the Casino card room.

"Wells Fargo money," Clem Carson babbled. "Hot money from the bank hold-up. Trig Chansey and Lawyer Prim. I gotta get there first!"

Cord Porter listened, and wiped the streaming perspiration from his forehead. The Vaca bank had been robbed a year ago, but the robbers had never been found.

Old Doc Whitney placed a cool steady hand on the patient's forehead. The wounded hand was neatly bandaged, and Mrs. Whitney was clearing away the instruments.

"Who is the brains of the gang?" the doc-

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THE DEVIL'S GRAVEYARD

tor asked in a clear quiet voice that carried.

Cord Porter knew that Clem Carson was unconscious, but the doctor was trying to reach the wounded man's subconscious mind. Clem Carson spoke drowsily.

"Lawyer Prim. He's the fastest killer. . . ."

Cord Porter jerked when the window curtain snapped up on the roller. A gun roared from the outer darkness just as the sheriff cleared leather. Cord Porter triggered a shot at a long bony face as the killer bucked down his smoking gun for a second shot.

The doctor and his wife both dropped to the floor and made themselves thin below the level of the window sill. Cord Porter eared back the hammer of his gun on the recoil, facing the window in a crouch. Then the thud of running boots came around the side of the house from the front.

"Hold your fire, sheriff! Looks like Lawyer Prim, and he ain't moving a muscle!"

"Stay back, Saint!" Porter warned. "He might be playing possum!"

Silence for a long moment, and then the deputy spoke again.

"Send the coroner out, sheriff. Lawyer Prim has three eyes, and he can't see out of any of them!"

Doc Whitney got to his feet, helped his wife up, and reached for his stethoscope. He was also the county coroner, and it was his duty to report on all homicides.

"Take a look at Carson first, Doc," Porter said, and his voice was a hushed whisper.

Doc Whitney started to put his stethoscope against Carson's left breast, but he stopped the move with a sharp intake of breath. Carson had been shot through the heart.

"The deceased met his death from a gunshot wound," Doc Whitney announced without emotion, and walked from the room.

Cord Porter followed him out the front door, around the side of the house where Saint John was kneeling beside the body of a man in a black broadcloth suit.

Doc Whitney placed his stethoscope over the lawyer's heart, listened for a moment, and nodded his white head. Then he shifted his gaze to the dead man's face and pointed to a little black hole between the lawyer's staring black eyes.

"Lawyer Prim met his death at the hands of the sheriff of Vaca County, acting in the line of duty. The cause of death was a .45 bullet through the brain. Deputy, notify the mortician."

"Mortician?" Saint John repeated. "Oh yeah, you mean Boot Hill Crandall, the undertaker. I'll be right back, boss!"

Cord Porter drew his smoke-grimed six-shooter, ejected the spent shell, and thumbed a cartridge through the loading gate with

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"Don't tell Saint John what Clem Carson said," Porter spoke quietly to Doc Whitney. "I'm riding out to make an investigation."

"Sigafoose Barnard," the doctor whispered. "You're riding out to the Devil's Graveyard. That's outside the county, but good luck, Cord."

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Pays for its Grave

KEEPING to the alley behind the main street, Porter rode out of town at a walk. He removed his law star as he rode because Vaca town was on the western border of the county. Out in the badlands he was just a citizen, but even a citizen had the power of arrest if he cornered a murderer and had the ability to back up his constitutional rights.

Out among the lava rocks, Cord Porter lifted his horse into a high lope. According to tabs, there should be close to fifty thousand dollars buried under the headstone of the late Sigafoose Barnard. A three-way partnership had been dissolved by death, with only Trig Chansey remaining to enjoy the loot.

An early moon was rising behind the towering parapets of the Vermillion Cliffs when Cord Porter came to the entrance of the Devil's Graveyard. When the moon crested over the rimrock, the desert boot hill would be lighted brightly.

Cord Porter walked his horse through the pass and circled to the left to keep in the deep shadows of the canyon wall. The distance to Hell's Half Acre was perhaps a half mile from the entrance, and the sheriff stopped his horse two hundred yards from the rows of grisly headstones.

Porter tied the animal to a springy 'suite branch and slipped a loop of saddle-string over the horse's nose. This old Indian trick would prevent the horse from whickering.

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THE DEVIL'S GRAVEYARD

The sheriff's eyes had become accustomed to the gloom, and he made his way toward the headstones on foot. The moon slipped over the high peaks, and for a moment Cord Porter blinked against the eerie silvery light.

He raised his head carefully and stared from under the wide brim of his Stetson. The headstones in Hell's Half Acre were silhouetted like ghostly sentries against the sky line. Something moved back in the second row, and then Porter heard the metallic ping of a steel pick.

Cord Porter crouched low and searched for a clump of desert greasewood. He pulled up one which was large enough to shield his head and shoulders. Then he began the slow advance across the deep sand, keeping down behind the bush.

The sheriff breathed easily as he made out the slender figure of a man working swiftly at the base of a headstone. The moonlight picked out a name which Boot Hill Crandall had chiseled on the lava shaft.

BARNARD SIGAFOOSE

Cord Porter's rugged face changed to an angry outraged scowl. He had been present when Gospel Cummings had consigned the murdered cattleman to his grave.

The sheriff began to inch forward behind his mesquite bush. Trig Chansey rested against his shovel once, and scanned the canyon floor. His horse was tied to a slender volcanic headstone, with a pair of saddle-bags behind the cantle and a bedroll over the bags.

Chansey stared at the 'squite bush for a long moment, and then went back to his digging. Cord Porter advanced again. He smiled without mirth when he came to an open grave.

Boot Hill Crandall had dug that grave, and had been paid for the work. It had been intended for Sevens Todd or . . . Trig Chansey. Three feet by seven, and six feet deep, with the sand and rock piled high to the left.

Cord Porter thrust his 'squite bush ahead and crawled up behind it. Then he was behind the mound of fresh sand where he rested until his pulse and breathing returned to normal. He could hear Trig Chansey digging about twenty feet away, and Porter inched his head around the mound when the digging stopped.

Trig Chansey was on his knees in front of the headstone. He reached under and pulled out a stout metal box. The hinges creaked protestingly, and Porter saw Chansey lift a canvas sack from the Wells Fargo strong box.

Trig Chansey straightened up and started for his horse. Before he could lift his bedroll

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

to open the saddle-bags, Cord Porter stood up and called sternly.

"Drop that money and reach for the sky, Chansey!"

Trig Chansey whirled about like a cornered wolf. The sack dropped from his hands, and his thin lips snarled back to show his broken yellow teeth. His hands lifted to the level of his shoulders when he saw the glint of moonlight on Porter's .45 Peacemaker Colt.

"You've got no jurisdiction out here!" Chansey almost screamed.

"Don't need any," Porter answered evenly. "It's always open season on wolves, and the law never outlaws murder!"

"Don't shoot, Prim," Chansey said suddenly. "All I want is the chance to match cutters with the law!"

Cord Porter smiled coldly in the moonlight. "Do you believe in ghosts?" he asked the killer. "How do you know old Sigafoose Barnard isn't standing right behind you?"

"Sigafoose Barnard is dead," Chansey answered in a flat tone. "When I kill a man, he stays that away!"

"That goes double for me," Porter answered grimly. "Lawyer Prim couldn't be behind me."

Trig Chansey stared and his lower jaw began to gape. His ruse had failed.

"Clem Carson," Chansey murmured. "What about him?"

"Dead," Porter answered carelessly. "Lawyer Prim shot him through the heart, and I dotted the lawyer's eyes, if you know what I mean. Clem talked before the operation."

"Yeah? Keep on talking," Chansey snarled. "What'd he say?"

"He cleared up several mysteries," Porter answered quietly. "About that twenty thousand Sigafoose was carrying the night he was killed. Then there was a stage hold-up, and the bank robbery. All of it buried under the headstone of old Sigafoose Barnard's last resting place."

"Lawyer Prim killed the driver and guard on the stage," Chansey accused his dead partner. "Clem Carson killed the bank guard!"

"Who killed Sigafoose?" Porter asked.

"I did," Chansey admitted without hesitation. "But I had witnesses to prove that the old mossyhorn drew against me first!"

"Old Sigafoose was drunk that night," Porter said musingly. "His gun was empty; someone had drawn all the shells!"

"That's what you said in court," Chansey sneered. "I was acquitted on the grounds of self defense!"

"The law says you can't place a man's life in jeopardy more than once for the same crime," Porter said heavily. "Sevens Todd saw who emptied old Barnard's six-shooter."

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Trig Chansey straightened with a jerk. Sevens Todd was still alive . . . and then Chansey remembered what Porter had said about the law. They couldn't try him twice for the same crime.

"Perhaps not in court," Porter said softly, as he read the gloating expression of triumph on Chansey's mean face. "But you forget that you've admitted a part in the stage hold-up, and the bank robbery. That still ties you up with those killings, and the charge is—murder!"

A cloud scudded across the moon to cast a deep shadow across the rows of headstones. Trig Chansey slapped down for his guns and threw himself down and to the side.

Cord Porter triggered a shot as Chansey went to his knees with his right-hand gun clearing leather.

The killer rocked back on his haunches and tipped over into the newly dug grave. He screamed with terror when sliding rocks and sand cascaded down on top of him.

"It caves!" he shouted hoarsely. "I'm being buried alive!"

CORD PORTER turned when several horses raced across the Devil's Graveyard, coming at top speed to Hell's Half Acre. John Saint John threw himself from the saddle with a cocked six-shooter in his big left hand.

Old Doc Whitney dismounted slowly, followed by Gospel Cummings. Trig Chansey began to scream from the yawning grave.

"You didn't kill him?" Gospel Cummings asked solemnly.

Cord Porter shook his head. "Just shot the guns from his hands. Let's give a listen!"

"I killed that driver!" Chansey screamed. "Kill me, but don't bury me alive!"

"You heard his confession, gents," Cord Porter said sternly. "Trig Chansey will get a fair trial according to the law!"

Saint John uncoiled a rope taken from his saddle, flipped the noose down into the grave, and pulled the hysterical outlaw from the tumbling sand.

"You should have killed him," he told Porter in a hoarse growl. "He paid for this grave!"

"Like the man who dug a pit and then fell into it," old Doc Whitney remarked.

"Blessed are the merciful," Gospel Cummings quoted, and stepped behind a towering headstone, reaching into the pockets of his coat tails.

"Stop the bleeding so we can get on back to town, Doc," Cord Porter told the old medico. "We've recovered the stolen money, and caught the killer. I'm getting the creeps back here in the Devil's Graveyard!"

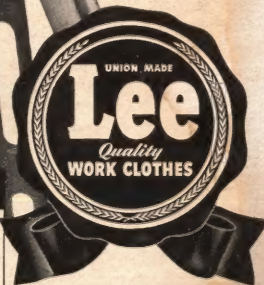
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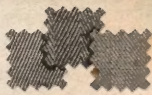


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